YouTube, TikTok, and Vat19: Exploring a New Social Media Platform Launch

Patrick Brian Goldberg
Vanderbilt University / Vat19
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Dedication

This paper, this project, and this degree are dedicated to the weirdoes, outcasts, and dropouts. And to the principals, teachers, and students who remind those kids they matter.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank you for reading this. You haven't gotten very far, but you stopped here, and I appreciate it. At this point, feel free to add me on LinkedIn and follow me on TikTok @DrPatrickG. Hearing from people who have benefited from or found this sixteen months of work useful makes it all the more worthwhile.

Without my advisor, Dr. Laura Booker, this project would have never escaped the earliest planning stages. Dr. Booker consistently provided the perfect balance between challenging my methods and findings and supporting this, at the time of conception, unique project. I don't know how many cohorts / generations we are from TikTok videos being the primary form of capstone delivery, but when I undertook this project it was far from typical. For that support, I am eternally grateful.

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Abstract

Vat19, a novelty shop and YouTube creator organization, was interested in better understanding how to evaluate emerging platforms. This project focused on considerations and measures of success for TikTok through the lens of parasocial interaction theory, brand equity theory, and dual process theory. Insights were captured using a novel survey instrument, video content coding and comment analysis, and interviews with experienced users of the TikTok platform. The recommendations identified, while specific to Vat19's context, can provide both a foundation for considering other platforms and a starting point for other organizations looking to diversify their social media presence.

Keywords: TikTok, YouTube, Parasocial, Brand Equity, Social Media

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TL;DR:

Social media platform success is an art form, and the safest path to success is imitation until you reach the point of innovation.

Executive Summary

Vat19's growth on YouTube was a fortuitous alignment of talent, timing, and resources. As an early mover, Vat19 has benefited from growing alongside the YouTube platform and maintaining a steady increase in subscribers and video views. The focus of this project was on addressing two key areas of concern: 1) Identify any shortcuts or best practices for launching on a new social media platform, specifically TikTok; 2) Understand the risks of negative repercussions for investing time and resources into a new social media platform, specifically TikTok.

Key Findings

- Vat19's TikTok launch has been solid with good content and engagement on videos
- There is minimal risk that spending time / resources on emerging social media will have a direct negative impact on Vat19's YouTube vertical
- Online video consumers are more tolerant of "negative behavior" videos on YouTube than on TikTok
- Online video consumers are more sensitive to authenticity and the feeling of one-on-one interactions on TikTok than on YouTube

Recommendations

1. Get verified through more engagement (stitching / dueting) with other users
2. Continue to consistently post daily content
3. Utilize TikTok features like lip sync, stitch, and duet to create personalized engagement between fans and Vat19 employees
4. Promote individual employees / personalities on TikTok to create a deeper, authentic connections for fans and customers

Introduction

Gotta Go Flamingo – a singing and dancing toy flamingo that eats and poops, a three pound giant gummy worm, and the world's hottest chocolate bar are some of the top items listed on Vat19.com's web store. *World's Largest Gummy Worm*, *We got into a bathtub full of Liquid Glass Thinking Putty!*, and *We Ate Worms, Brains, and Hair! | Gummy VS Real Challenge #1* are top videos on Vat19's popular YouTube channel, which has over eight million subscribers and over seven billion video views. Vat19 Started as a video production company near the dawn of the internet, and in 2007 pivoted to producing fun commercials for their unique selection of "curiously awesome" gifts.

In elementary school a guest speaker told my class commercials would go away as cable television grew and people paid for their shows through subscriptions. At the time, my favorite shows were 25 minute commercials for *GI Joe*, *Transformers*, *He-Man*, and *My Little Pony*. I suggested making a channel that was just commercials. The speaker dismissed that idea as silly, because why would anyone want to watch commercials? Two decades later, Vat19 asked a better question: What kind of commercials would people WANT to watch? Based on Vat19's most popular videos, the answer is: Making giant versions of anything, watching relatable people suffer while eating strange or spicy foods, and seeing unusual products used in real-world settings.

Since 2007 Vat19 has uploaded over 1,600 videos, stocked over 1,000 different products, and sold over 1 million pounds of gummy candies. In that same time, YouTube grew from fewer than 3 million channels to over 31 million channels. Vat19's YouTube presence has a sustained subscriber count higher than ubiquitous gaming brand Nintendo and family-brand Disney. Vat19 also eclipses Nike, Ubisoft, Fisher-Price, Monster High, and Mattel, boasting more than twice as many subscribers as those brands combined. Out of over 31m channels on YouTube, Vat19 maintains a place in the top 500 for video view count and overall brand presence in the Entertainment category.

With Vat19's sustained success and growth it has been easy to continue to feed the same YouTube machine that has consistently paid out. Make awesome videos, promote the brand, and get paid for ads and sponsorships while driving shoppers to Vat19.com to buy "curiously awesome" items featured in the videos. In 2007, YouTube's partner program was the first major effort to share ad revenue directly with creators. From 2017 to 2020, YouTube creators generated over $46 billion in ad revenue for YouTube (Statista Research Department, 2021). Of that, YouTube claims to have paid out over $30 Billion to creators through merchandising, service features, and an ad revenue sharing plan that generally pays creators 55% of revenue from ads on the creator's channel (Bergen et al., 2021).

Timing and quality were a huge part of Vat19's early success on YouTube. Vat19 was an early mover and their high production value stood out from much of the other content on YouTube. In 2007, a high definition camera was an investment at around $2,000 for an entry-level DSLR and editing required substantial skill and access to expensive software and hardware. In 2021 high definition cameras have become ubiquitous and pocket-sized, with software designed to deliver professional results to amateurs in every consumer's pocket. In 2007, YouTube was still finding its footing as a curator and promoter of content. In 2021

YouTube has become saturated with content and brands, and the opportunities for expansion and growth have become more limited with smaller ad payouts for each view. Additionally, the YouTube algorithm has evolved into a nebulous, dynamic system that creators claim, despite its intent, often makes it difficult to connect content with interested viewers.

Social media is a constantly expanding landscape that involves new generations overtaking the old as platforms, algorithms, and users fundamentally change. Vat19, a first-generation YouTube channel, has been slow to expand and adopt other platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Vat19 has rightfully focused on YouTube, the partnership that has driven Vat19's success for over a decade.

Vat19

In 2018 I was introduced to Vat19's YouTube channel by my then 10-year-old child, Lily. Lily, like many in their age group, enjoyed Vat19's funny videos and wacky food products. I added Vat19 to my subscribed channels and became a regular viewer. Over time I came to know individual personalities, products, and Vat19's unique style of keeping viewers engaged. Vat19 wasn't blindly selling a product; Vat19 was showing unique products in action like a real person could use (and sometimes misuse) them.

In 2019 my family moved 600 miles from Chattanooga, TN to St. Louis, Missouri. Lily was feeling lonely and strange in a new city full of people and places we didn't know. I surprised Lily with a trip to Vat19's studio / warehouse tour a short drive from our new home. Lily got to see the performers, sets, and products they had watched on YouTube in person. The whole experience carried an on-brand Vat19 message sharing props from videos, trivia about video highlights, free products, viewing a pre-publication video, and an opportunity to roam the shelves of the warehouse and buy Vat19 products.

A year later, I reached out to Vat19's founder, owner, and self-proclaimed "Evil Boss" Jamie Salvatori to discuss opportunities for a quality improvement project applying the concepts I had learned from a Vanderbilt / Peabody doctoral program to the Vat19 business. Jamie and I reviewed a number of potential problems of practice, and all of them were various aspects of the enviable challenge Vat19 faces: expansion. Expansion of Vat19's warehouse space and operations, expansion of Vat19's staff, and expansion of Vat19's social media video footprint into less familiar territory like Instagram and TikTok were the key topics that surfaced. The video team was interested in experimenting with TikTok so Jamie selected that as the most pressing opportunity to align research with practice at Vat19.

Jamie is the guiding hand for the look, feel, and experience of every Vat19 interaction. Jamie collaborates with a team of around three dozen at Vat19's St. Louis, Missouri, production and distribution center. Jamie and his team code the software, act, write, edit, stock, ship packages, respond to customers, guide tours of the studio, and curate the curiously awesome from around the world.

Problem of Practice

In the 1990's I got my first modern PC and met my first online friends using dial-up BBS's that allowed chat, text-based games, and file sharing. This was our first taste of social media. As illustrated in Figure 1, just after the turn of the century, social media became more accessible and prolific with the

rise of Friendster in 2002, MySpace in 2003, and Facebook achieving significant market share in 2009 (Shah, 2016). Alongside these dynamic social media platforms, in 2007 Twitter launched its "microblogging" concept, allowing people to "tweet" and "retweet" 140 character messages.

A Brief History of Social Media

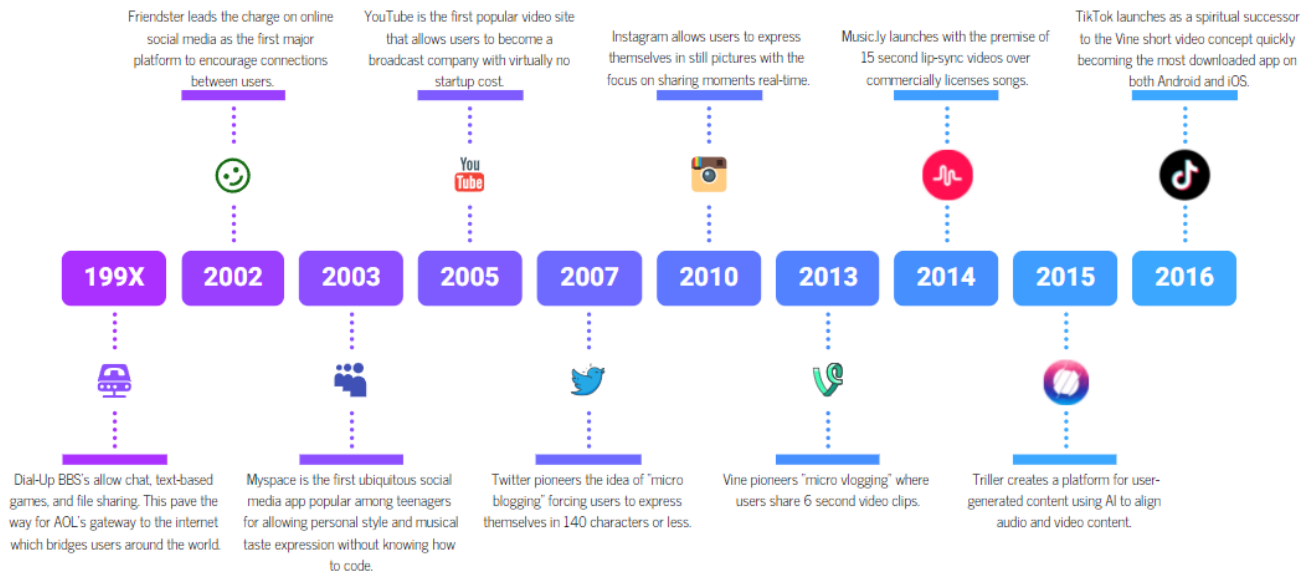

Figure 1 A Brief History of Social Media

In 2004 Jawed Karim was disappointed that, in spite of the many web and social media sites that existed at the time, Karim was unable to find video of the infamous Janet Jackson wardrobe malfunction from that year's Super Bowl Half-Time (McIntyre, 2015). Seeing an opportunity, Karim put together a team and created the platform that would launch in 2005 as YouTube. On YouTube anyone could share videos of anything anytime. In 2010 Instagram, a picture-only sharing site, launched. Two years later, Instagram was purchased by Facebook for $1 billion (Shah, 2016). It would be four more years before Instagram began to offer video content. In the interim, Vine, a short-form video platform quickly purchased by Twitter, encouraged brevity by limiting clips to 6 seconds. Vine was popular, but fizzled in 2016 in the face of competition from Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. The spiritual successor to Vine was a short-video-song clip service called Music.ly that was designed around the concept of 15 second lip sync videos (Leskin, 2020). Music.ly would go on to be purchased by ByteDance and rebranded TikTok for the U.S. market in late 2017 (Leskin, 2020).

The TikTok platform has seen a meteoric rise, rapidly gaining users, notoriety, and even the attention of the U.S. government (Leskin, 2020). In 2020, after it was widely reported that teens on TikTok had falsely inflated the expectations for a presidential campaign rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, then president Donald Trump leveraged national security powers in an (ultimately failed)

effort to ban TikTok from the United States (Leskin, 2020). Over the course of 2020, when a pandemic coronavirus forced children to be home and away from activities and school for days and weeks at a time, TikTok overtook YouTube as the most watched user-generated video content app (Perez, 2020). For brands that have relied on young YouTube eyes to spread brand awareness and make sales, this shift called for reviewing how to leverage TikTok to stay in front of migrating users.

In early 2020 Vat19 recognized TikTok as an emerging video platform with the same potential Vat19 saw in YouTube over a decade ago. However, Vat19 is a grown up company with grown up responsibilities as a brand and an employer. Vat19 would like to be more deliberate in their approach to transitioning the Vat19 brand onto TikTok now, while also defining a path for evaluating other emergent media platforms in the future. ***YouTube, as a single-source, third-party platform, poses a growth challenge and a potential risk to Vat19's overall success and stability.***

Existing Literature

At the outset of this project in September 2020, a search of the Vanderbilt University online library for TikTok, constrained to peer-reviewed journal articles returned 358 results, mostly referencing either how TikTok influences dental care decisions, or the use of social media to spread misinformation. That same search one year later returned 716 results, with 108 articles addressing the role of TikTok in marketing. Notably, many of these new results focus on mental health and medical interventions.

When expanding to a new interactive platform, three elements are important to maximize success and minimize risk: 1) The way fans connect with the Vat19 performers; 2) The way fans connect with Vat19 as a brand; 3) The way Vat19 attracts new attention to the Vat19 brand through social media. Although academic literature does not provide robust guidance in the context of social media and YouTube videos, there is over a half-century of writing on the relationship between viewers and performers, brand loyalty and the reciprocal relationship between brands and consumers, and the subconscious cues consumers use to select brands and products.

Parasocial Interactions: Where Fans Are Made

Horton and Wohl (1956, p. 215) first labeled parasocial interactions, and described parasocial interactions as, "[A] seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer." With the expansion of television, a series can run for decades with core characters remaining throughout. We now have a movie universe where we can see the same guy be Tony Stark / Iron Man for an entire 11 year, 11 movie arc where there are growth and changes and failures, but fundamentally Iron Man always lives up to our expectations of him as a character (Acuna, 2020). Horton and Wohl (1956) predicted that this consistency makes fictional characters more appealing than normal relationships because of the way parasocial relationships exist in a bubble of controlled perfection – even when the character fails, it is done in service to some kind of redemption.

In the discussion of super-fans of comic movies, there is a toxic thread of racism, sexism, and homophobia that is difficult for even casual viewers to miss (Kendrick, 2016). Collisson et al. (2018) described an intersection of research that associates insecure and avoidant attachment styles with a more significant investment of energy into parasocial relationships with fictional characters or their celebrity portrayers specifically for their simplicity, lack of opportunity for rejection, and few actual direct demands. Further exploring the overlap between fandom and parasocial relations, fans often attempt to expand their relationship with the performers portraying characters, but still retain a sense that the character is its own independent entity. This requires setting aside knowledge of the writing, producing, and directing that underlies what the fan is seeing (Ferris, 2001). Knowing a character is made up does not mitigate the feeling that a character is a real, relatable person with whom the fan can have a real relationship. The depth of this relationship often leads to a sense of defensiveness about the character or their universe where a fan will respond to remarks, especially negative remarks, about their fandoms as if the remarks were about a close,

personal friend (Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956).

These one-way relationships between a individual consuming media (viewer) and media personality (object) generally contain three critical elements: 1) they are voluntary and initiated by the viewer; 2) the object feels to the viewer like a companion; 3) the viewer feels drawn to the object either because the viewer relates to the object, the viewer associates the object with real-world people and relationships, or the viewer is drawn to the object by a committed sense of hatred and spite (Shramm& Hartmann, 2008).

Predating the internet and mass media, individuals have long created identities to align with different social contexts (Dunn & Creek, 2015). For children, this could mean presenting as quiet and polite at home, pious and devout in church, and obstinate and disruptive at school. For adults, the contrast may be quiet and reserved at home and gregarious at work. These various identities may be very similar across contexts or differ widely based on the individual's perception of the risks, threats, and support available in a given environment (Dunn & Creek, 2015). With the emergence of digital interactions, people have developed a self aligned with the digital world that may complement or contrast with who they are in the real world (Chen 2016). In addition to influencing how we act and react in digital spaces like chat rooms and comment sections, these digital selves also influence our perception of usually one-way relationships with the media we consume online, and can make the people and characters in videos seem like people we have a personal connection with (Ferchaud et al., 2018).

Like the relationships formed with celebrities and the characters those actors portray, individuals also form third-order, purely parasocial relationships with brands (Labrecque, 2014). When a consumer perceives a brand as being open and interactive with the consumer, the consumer tends to have a higher sense of parasocial interaction, meaning the consumer views their relationship with the brand similar to a friendship (Labrecque, 2014). Conversely, when a brand is perceived as distant or non-interactive, the consumer has a lower sense of parasocial interaction and sees the brand as an abstract / inanimate entity. An example of a universally known brand that tends to foster high parasocial interaction is Disney (Tafesse& Wien, 2017). Disney does this by overlapping their movies, theme parks, merchandise, and advertising presence to promote a sense of nostalgia, connectedness, and personal attention.

A viewer's interaction with a brand initiates a series of decisions that are predominantly influenced by their judgment of liking, disliking, or feeling neutral about the brand (Giles, 2006). Viewers who feel positively about the brand are likely to, without overtly considering it, imitate and discuss the brand with others, which further enhances the viewer's positive perception of the brand and association (Giles, 2006). Over time, through this process, the viewer is likely to engage in deeper ways with the brand and begin to associate the brand with other relationships in their life (Giles, 2006). For some, this will be as far as the parasocial relationship extends. For a subset, however, this relationship will be escalated to seek out some form of recognition or reciprocation (Giles, 2006). In the social media environment, this could include comments, direct messages, and content sharing. Beyond

social media, some "super fans" will seek more one-to-one contact through meet and greets, Q&A, or subscribing to paid membership-based services.

Brand Equity: How Companies and Consumers Sustain One Another

Vat19's brand identity includes a logo, video style, jingle, and product selection criteria that, in parts and in whole, tell a consumer they are interacting with Vat19 (Keller, 1993). Two complimentary key concepts in brand equity are brand awareness and brand recognition. Awareness describes the idea that a brand is likely to come to mind when presented with something associated with that brand's identity (Keller, 1993). For example, if you need to buy a special gift for someone who is into offbeat toys, and you have previous experience with Vat19, the thought of finding a gift will pair up with the fact that Vat19 sells offbeat toys. Recognition is a lower form of awareness where you recognize the brand by name, but would not readily think of that brand based solely on being presented with a category or product (Keller 1993). Brand awareness, not brand recognition, influences future purchase decisions (Esch, et al., 2006).

By and large, consumers want to be loyal to brands and products (Aaker, 1991). Once a consumer has chosen to do business with a company, breaking that bond and ending the relationship between the business and consumer requires work on the part of the business (Aaker, 1991). The more a consumer chooses to interact with a brand, the more tolerant that consumer becomes of mistakes and shortcomings with that brand and the less likely the consumer is to choose alternatives (Wu, 2011). Somewhat influenced by the cost, both financial and social, any interaction after the first contact with a brand will lead to a consumer being more personally invested in continuing their relationship with the brand (Esch, 2006).

Prior to discrete consumer interactions, a brand has an image to maintain and project into the marketplace. Once the consumer is aware of a brand, satisfaction with the cumulative interactions with that brand will lead to a sense of trust or distrust with the brand as an entity (Esch, 2006). When the consumer trusts the brand, the consumer is likely to develop a sense of attachment to the brand which results in discussing the brand positively, sharing the brand with others, and engaging in future interactions with the brand (Esch, 2006). When the consumer distrusts the brand, the consumer will still discuss the brand with others but the consumer is less likely to engage in future interactions with the brand (Esch, 2006).

Dual Process: How We Decide When We Don't Know We Are Deciding

In 1942 the New York Times published their first ranking of national book sales, which is known as the New York Times Bestsellers list (Bear, 1992). This authoritative list of the bestselling books in the country is published in numerous newspapers, magazines, and online sources every week. The accolade of being declared the "#1 New York Times Bestselling Book!" is emblazoned on innumerable fiction and non-fiction titles as a badge of honor to tell the casual passer-by that this book has the endorsement of the entire reading public for one particular week. The list itself has a reciprocal effect on sales - the most sold book goes on the list, and being on the list results in a book getting more sales (Sorenson, 2007). In 1956 Billboard started publishing a weekly album chart of best-

selling pop albums based on a vague and nebulous tally from individual record stores (Harvilla, 2021). Decades later, Billboard adopted sales data from Nielsen, the TV and radio view count company, to paint a more accurate picture of album sales, and the music charts were changed forever (Harvilla, 2021). In both the book and music industries, retailers, writers, publishers, singers, and consumers changed their behavior based on the perception that if lots of people were buying something, it was the thing that lots of people wanted to buy (Harville, 2021; Sorenson, 2007).

With the modern digital environment, consumers don't have to wait for a weekly bestseller list, box office report, or consumer tally to tell them what the most popular videos are. All of the major platforms prominently display view data before the user has to decide to watch a video. All things being equal, if two similar videos are uploaded at the same time and one gets an early lead on views, that video is likely to continue to get more views than its counterpart (Fu & Sim, 2011). For many users, this bandwagon effect is the entire driving force behind their viewing habits: see something is popular, watch it, make it more popular. For creators on the YouTube platform, thumbnail pictures are the best opportunity to interrupt the bandwagon effect and draw users to content that has not yet reached a large audience (Fu, 2012).

On YouTube, users have three primary entry points for video selection on the website: 1) The "Home" page which draws from user behavior, trends, and subscriptions to present the user with a set of large thumbnails; 2) The "Explore" page which lets the user click through specific categories; 3) The "Search" bar where users are seeking out a specific topic. In each of these entry points, the user is met with a thumbnail (still picture advertising the video), a title (text description of the video), the length of the video, and the number of views. To viewers, the goal is to see videos relevant to their search or interests. For most creators, the goal is to get their video seen by as many people as possible watching for as long as possible. Arousal, both in the sexual and non-sexual sense, especially negative arousal, spurs users to be more interested in actively selecting content (Yoon & Kim, 2019). For less intent-based searches, the position of the search result relative to other video options and the popularity of the video, assessed by views, are more relevant factors in if the video is selected (Yoon & Kim, 2019).

Design Reference

Lee et al. (2016) utilized Facebook ads to distribute a survey regarding use of a semi-restricted substance. Through Facebook targeting, the authors were able to get a 1.7% completion rate of people seeing the ad then completing the uncompensated survey. A similar campaign for the same audience yielded a 1.3% completion rate at a cost of approximately $280 for 1,036 responses (Crosier, et al., 2015). This survey approach created a model and set expectations for this type of solicitation.

One of the challenges in seeking out novel data on a specific set of research questions is the need to solicit responses from a broad range of individuals. Amazon's Mechanical Turk service is a platform that allows independent "workers" to perform tasks such as navigating a website, reading a paper, or completing a survey in exchange for payment. This service is popular among researchers for its ready availability of large pools with specific demographic criteria (Chandler et al.,

2019). Based on the success of Chandler et al.'s (2019) use of "screeners" to validate survey responses differentiated from inattentive users or automation software, integrating screening questions into the survey for this project should improve the quality of the findings derived from responses that pass the screening questions.

Emotion and sentiment mining is a complex, imprecise art that relies on a wide range of tools and techniques to attempt to triangulate useful responses (Yadollahi, et al., 2017). Vat19's business primarily exists on the internet. Aside from tours of the studio and warehouse, there is no brick-and-mortar shop for Vat19. As a result, a deep well of customer information exists within Vat19's comment sections on YouTube and TikTok. Amarasekara and Grant (2019) offered a possible model for using comment analysis as part of an overall research approach on a topic where YouTube video comments served as a significant source of data. The authors used a multi-layer randomization to select videos and comments and a simplified context-specific rubric to establish sentiment (Amarasekara& Grant, 2019). Further, the authors noted a relevant limitation to comment analysis that there is no way to know through comment analysis alone how representative the commenters are of the broader audience viewing a video (Amarasekara& Grant, 2019). Additionally, analysis using a sentiment lexicon is limited to applicability in a context, with certain standards and norms having a higher likelihood of skewing generalized sentiment coding (Yadollahi et al., 2017).

Conceptual Framework

Parasocial Interaction Theory

In 1926 silent movie heartthrob Rudolph Valentino, age 31, passed away unexpectedly from septicemia (Guida, 2005). For the first time in its history, the Washington Times (a Hearst-owned daily paper that ceased publication in 1939, not associated with the current Washington Times) put out a special edition covering Valentino's death (Guida, 2005). Thousands called, wrote letters, and flooded the streets for a funeral procession for this young actor. There was an outpouring of genuine grief that had not been previously recorded for the passing of an entertainer (Guida, 2005). Valentino was mourned by hundreds of thousands as if they knew and had a personal relationship with him. This one-sided relationship, where thousands of people felt a connection that was not directly reciprocated, is an early example of a parasocial relationship (Giles, 2006; Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Brand Equity Theory

Athletes, musical acts, and teenagers all operate in a reciprocal system where one brand promotes another. For example, Nike and LeBron James are one of the most well known athletic wear brands and sports stars, respectively. Each has their own marketable brand across various products. Nike pays LeBron James to wear their clothing and shoes. Nike also pays LeBron James to use James's likeness and name to promote a specific line of athletic shoes. Because of this mutually beneficial relationship, there are consumers who are loyal to LeBron James who will buy Nike products because of LeBron James, and there are consumers loyal to Nike who will follow LeBron James because of James's relationship with Nike. Brand Equity Theory describes a cyclical relationship in which a brand portrays itself with a certain image, consumers become aware of the brand, consumers engage with the brand, consumers build a relationship with the brand, and based on positive experiences the consumer continues to patronize the brand and promote the brand to others (Esch et al., 2006).

Dual Process Theory

Both YouTube and TikTok use algorithms to drive user engagement. With TikTok, the mechanism is blinded to the user. After watching one video on the app or webpage, TikTok will determine the next video the user sees based on prior views, like, follow, and comment activity, actions by other users, the user's location, and algorithmic features of the videos themselves. Conversely, YouTube's algorithm feeds the user options in the form of thumbnails and titles presented at the end of a video or in an automatically generated play queue where, if not stopped by the user, a next video will play automatically. This creates a fundamental divide in how users interact with videos on the two platforms. On TikTok, reputation and content is the best driver of getting a broader audience. On YouTube, decisions about the thumbnail picture, thumbnail text, and title all have a significant impact on the number of views and interactions a video will get.

Overarching Framework

In this framework, "viewers" is used to describe customers, followers, or subscribers to a brand's business or social media. For this project, I found Vat19's problem of practice centered well at the intersection of parasocial

interaction theory, brand equity theory, and dual process theory. For any brand, the entry point to this framework is the work that starts before the customer is aware of the brand to craft a **brand image** to present to the world. For some brands, this is a full-time responsibility, for others it grows organically out of the type of work and products the brand produces. For viewers, brand image matters when viewers have a **brand encounter**. A brand encounter includes, but is not limited to, purchasing a product, visiting a website, viewing a video, or seeing an ad. The viewer will process this encounter one of three ways: 1) Making a **content decision**; 2) Making a **context decision**; or Making a prior **relationship decision**. Content decisions are based on the encounter itself and the merits of the presentation by the brand. Whether this is a video, a thumbnail, or an ad, the viewer is judging the brand on the brand's own merits alone. Context decisions are based on the accompanying circumstances of the encounter. These circumstances include ordinal positioning, such as being labeled as a "Best Seller" or being presented in a ranked list, as well as more direct demonstrations of popularity such as view count or box office revenue. Relationship decisions come from the viewer recognizing the brand from prior interactions and, whether good or bad, prior interactions help frame the new interaction.

For content and context decisions, the viewer engages in a reflexive, passive process of **brand awareness** where the viewer is making decisions about their perception of the brand and attaching labels (cool / trendy / fleek / lit / boring / dated / uncool) to the brand. Following passive brand awareness, or bypassing it for prior relationships, the viewer makes a more overt **brand judgement** of either liking or disliking the brand. This overt judgment in a branding context leads to a personal rating of **brand satisfaction** based on both this discrete transaction and, where applicable, prior interactions. This satisfaction, which is either positive (satisfied) or negative (dissatisfied) will determine how the viewer subsequently behaves toward the brand.

For dissatisfied viewers, there will likely be a sense of **brand distrust** where the viewer treats the interaction as intentional, direct, and nefarious behavior from the brand to the viewer personally. In contrast, for satisfied viewers, there will likely be a sense of **brand trust** where the viewer treats the interaction as intentional, direct, and positive behavior from the brand to the viewer. Additionally, satisfied viewers are more likely to experience **brand internalization** where the viewer feels a sense of mutual relationship with the brand. For strongly positive interactions, satisfied viewers may also escalate to **brand imitation** where the viewer buys products, takes recommendations seriously, and the viewer believes that the brand shares the viewer's values. Positive interactions also encourage **brand engagement** behaviors such as following on other social media, interacting in comments, and internalizing how other viewers feel about the brand.

Both satisfied and dissatisfied viewers are likely to engage in **brand discussion** sharing their experience and opinions about the brand with friends, family, and broader audiences such as review websites where possible. In both cases, this discussion will shape the memory of the experience the viewer has with the brand and influence future interactions. Along with this discussion, highly or repeatedly satisfied viewers may also escalate from brand

engagement to **brand attachment** and **brand relationships**. With brand attachment, the viewer sees the brand as an entity with which the viewer could be friends, and brand relationships take that to the level of the viewer having a parasocial relationship that feels mutual and reciprocated with the brand. This kind of relationship may also escalate to **contact** attempts where the viewer seeks more one-on-one interaction or acknowledgment from the brand through VIP events, conferences, or more directed social media commentary.

Following this process of interactions and decisions by the viewer attributing intent to the brand, any **future interactions** with the brand will start as a **relationship decision** influenced by the outcome of prior interactions and the subsequent escalation of the relationship between the viewer and the brand as a result of those interactions. Most relationships between viewer and brand are additive and cyclical. In cases where a negative satisfaction encounter has occurred, it is possible for the brand to use successive positive satisfaction events to reroute the viewer to a more positive perception of the brand. Similarly, every interaction runs the risk to the brand of dissatisfying the viewer and putting the viewer on a negative satisfaction path.

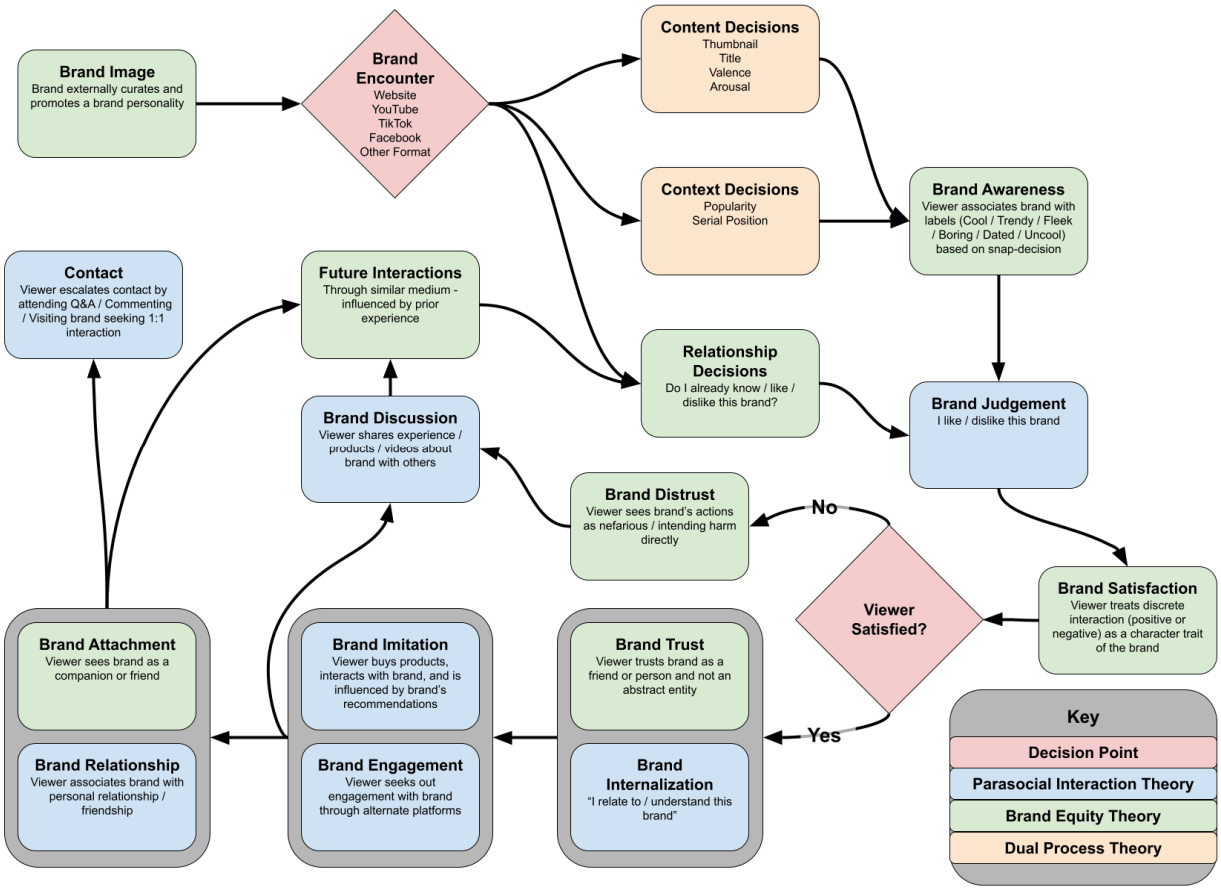

Figure 2 Brand Equity + Parasocial Interaction + Dual Process Theories

Project Questions

In order to capture multiple facets of the expansion process, I collected and analyzed data to address the following questions:

(1) What are the risks of launching media content on a new platform?

These risks center on both financial and social-capital elements, since Vat19's brand perception is valuable in the marketplace. A significant portion of Vat19's revenue comes from YouTube ad and sponsorship arrangements, and drawing users away from this monetized content could have a direct negative impact on overall earnings.

(2a) What are some common attributes of "viral" TikToks?

In order to be efficient with this new platform, Vat19 should approach TikTok with a mature understanding of what users are "looking for" on TikTok.

(2b) What are some common attributes of existing Vat19 media that align with the attributes of "viral" TikToks?

Vat19 has an extensive back catalog of videos containing actors, characters, products, and songs for a large number of situations. By identifying the overlap between the content most desired on TikTok and the content in Vat19's existing archives, Vat19 can leverage their scale and history to get recognition on TikTok with minimal additional effort or expense in producing videos.

(3) What role do personalities / brand loyalty play in social media video success?

Vat19's "actors" are employees who have other jobs in the organization that also appear on camera. These employees perform essential business functions as their primary role and secondarily appear in Vat19's videos. Vat19 does some limited user-comment engagement, but this question will help identify if there are opportunities for Vat19 to change their approach on the relationship between their performers and their audience.

Project Design

I conducted expert interviews, engaged social media users with a survey, compiled and reviewed comments from TikTok videos and YouTube videos, and reviewed, coded, and compared video content from Vat19 and other brands. I used these varied approaches to contextualize Vat19's market penetration and consumer interactions with Vat19 in order to understand best practices for the consideration of new social media platforms, starting with TikTok.

Methods

Survey

The survey design was centered on questions about Vat19's brand and how recognizable Vat19 is among other YouTube and TikTok brands. The three key goals of the survey were to: 1) Understand market penetration for Vat19; 2) Assess brand overlap between consumers aware of Vat19 on YouTube and TikTok; 3) Understand consumer reported preferences for sharing video content on YouTube and TikTok. The survey, found in Appendix A, contained six demographic questions, two question matrices regarding awareness of specific brands on YouTube and TikTok, two question matrices about sharing tendencies, and two question matrices about social media behavior.

Users responding "Under 18" to "Which age group best describes you?" were routed to a thank you page and did not complete the survey. The scope of this project was limited to subjects of unknown ages (YouTube and TikTok comments) and those 18 and older for screened direct respondents. Users responding "No" to "Do you regularly interact with social media...using English language?" were routed to a thank you page and did not complete the survey. The scope of the survey was limited to users who interact predominantly in English to align with the predominant viewership of Vat19 media. Users responding "No" to "Do you agree to answer these questions solely based on your own knowledge and experience without outside help?" were allowed to complete the survey, but their responses were excluded from analysis.

Due to the length of the survey and the incentives offered for completion, I was concerned about the risk of responders using automated survey completion tools or providing "random" answers not based on the questions and prompts. As a validity test to differentiate human responses from automated or random responses, I included two false brands in the TikTok brand listing and two false brands in the YouTube brand listing. I also included a direct question regarding intent to answer honestly.

For distribution I used a convenience sample of responses from my personal social media (104 responses), a paid Prime panel (135 responses), A Facebook ad campaign (67 responses), a student-directed convenience sample (14 responses), and a Google ad campaign (4 responses). I also attempted an Amazon Mechanical Turk panel which yielded 170 responses, all of which failed the validity test built into the survey - every respondent either responded they had viewed or subscribed to / followed one of the four non-existent brands on YouTube or TikTok. Of the other 324 responses, 67 indicated an awareness of a brand that did not exist or declined to answer questions honestly and were also removed. This left 257 survey responses for analysis.

For convenience samples and ad campaigns, respondents were asked to nominate charities for one of four $25 donations. Panel surveys were paid on a per-survey basis for completing the survey. Surveys were captured using QuestionPro. The total cost of survey administration was $461.66, or a cost of $1.80 per included response. Donations of $25 each were made to Back Street Kittens, Victory Over Cancer Foundation, American Cancer Society, and Hope 4 Autism.

Video Comment Review

I extracted comments from YouTube videos and TikTok videos uploaded by Vat19. The three key goals of the video comment analysis were to: 1) Understand the overlap / divergence of comment style, sentiment, and users between YouTube and TikTok; 2) Assess the frequency of references to specific performers in Vat19 videos; 3) Evaluate the sentiment of user comments in relationship to specific performers. Ten Vat19 videos uploaded to YouTube between April 2021 and August 2021 and ten Vat19 videos uploaded to TikTok between April 2021 and August 2021 were selected for highest view count in the selected period. These videos have a total of 41.3m views and 30,913 comments (as of September 2021).

Comments from videos were extracted using exportcomments.com and evaluated against the NRC Emotion Lexicon using R studio. The NRC Emotion Lexicon applies one or more of eight emotions and two general orientations to 6,467 English words. The eight emotions are: trust, fear, sadness, anger, surprise, disgust, joy, anticipation, and the two orientations are positive and negative. For example, the word *hate* is associated in the NRC Emotion Lexicon with anger, disgust, fear, negative, and sadness. The word *love* is associated in the NRC Emotion Lexicon with joy and positive.

Video Content Review

A paid assistant and I watched 54 videos in the web-based player for both TikTok and YouTube. The three key goals of the video content analysis were to: 1) Identify specific, repeatable video elements that created video success on TikTok; 2) Assess how often the identified elements occurred in existing Vat19 YouTube videos; 3) Explore if there was a clear relationship between the performers in videos and the success of those videos.

Popular videos from five brands were selected based on aggregator lists and evaluated for content and themes ("25 inspiring brands on TikTok to fuel your creative strategy," 2021; Reitere, 2021). The five brands chosen were: @target, @chipotle, @gymshark, @magdashotel, and @youngnailsinc. These videos were coded based on a narrative of the video contents, the hashtags used in the video description, the words in the video description, and a narrative of the person / people featured in the video.

The three most popular TikTok videos on @target, totaling 8.1m views, along with the videos uploaded immediately prior and immediately following the three most popular videos were selected for coding. The three most popular videos on @chipotle, totaling 33.1m views, along with the videos uploaded immediately prior and immediately following the three most popular videos were selected for coding. The three most popular videos on @gymshark, totaling 31.6m views, along with the videos uploaded immediately prior and immediately following the three most popular videos were selected for coding. Since @magdashotel only had eight videos, the most popular video and the videos uploaded immediately prior and immediately following the most popular video were selected for coding. @youngnailsinc has 2,691 videos, the extraction tool only captured the most recent 330 videos dating back to June 14, 2021. Therefore, the three most popular videos during that time frame, totaling 3.8m views, along with their most popular video which had 5.1m views, and the videos uploaded immediately prior and immediately following

these four videos were selected for coding. The three most popular videos on @vat19, totaling 33.2m views, along with the fourth most popular video on @vat19 with 9.1m views, and the videos uploaded immediately prior and following these four videos were selected for coding. This gave a total of 54 TikTok videos to be coded. The base coding criteria included: Video description, hashtags, music, video length, screen text, narrative of the video contents, and a narrative description of the people in the video. Each cluster of three videos is differentiated by the designation of V for the high-view video, V-1 for the video uploaded immediately before the V of that cluster, and V+1 for the video uploaded immediately after the V of that cluster. Video links and descriptions are in Appendix B.

Interviews

I conducted two interviews with practitioners who had social media experience and expertise. The two key goals of these interviews were to: 1) Get expert perspective on how TikTok and YouTube differ; 2) Better understand the role of personality and interaction in TikTok success. Solicitations for additional interviews were sent to 18 other creators and experts via email, twitter, and TikTok messaging with four responses. Pre-interview discussions with respondents indicated, as my prior creator interview described, that for creators the blessings and curses of the TikTok algorithm are inscrutable. TikTok provides very little analytic data and insight into their method for promoting creators and videos to viewers. Based on this sentiment I concluded that the findings from the two completed interviews along with publicly available interviews with other creators would provide sufficient evidence without requiring more personal interviews.

One interview was conducted with an expert who oversees decision making across dozens of social media brands and platforms, including YouTube and TikTok, via phone on February 5, 2021 and memorialized only in notes. This individual asked to be anonymous for inclusion in this project and not identified by company or title. This expert will be referred to by the alias JJ for clarity. The interview with JJ was free-form where they walked me through a number of the things they look for in transitioning video content between platforms, metrics they review, and some of the shortcomings of the analytics on TikTok versus analytics on YouTube.

The other interview was conducted with Dr. Catherine Zeisner (@drzeisner), an academic creator with over 200k followers and 5.5m likes on her TikTok channel, via Zoom on February 17, 2021 and the audio recorded. Dr. Zeisner's interview followed the structure in Appendix C.

Findings

(1) What are the risks of launching media content on a new platform?

Summary

The risk to Vat19 launching on a new platform is that the video views on a new platform that is not monetized directly in the same way or at a similar payout to YouTube could reduce video views on YouTube. Based on social media user survey responses indicating no more than 10% of users currently consume Vat19's YouTube content, a lack of overlap of commenters between Vat19's YouTube and TikTok channels, expert interview feedback, and current literature on social media overlap this risk appears to be minimal and the more likely outcome of expanding to TikTok is a broader overall audience for Vat19's brand and products.

Survey

Less than 10 percent of survey respondents (22 out of 257) had heard of Vat19 either in a YouTube or TikTok context. Of those 22, nine had heard of Vat19 but never watched Vat19's videos, seven had watched Vat19's videos exclusively on YouTube, and six had watched Vat19's videos on both YouTube and TikTok. No respondents had viewed Vat19's videos exclusively on TikTok.

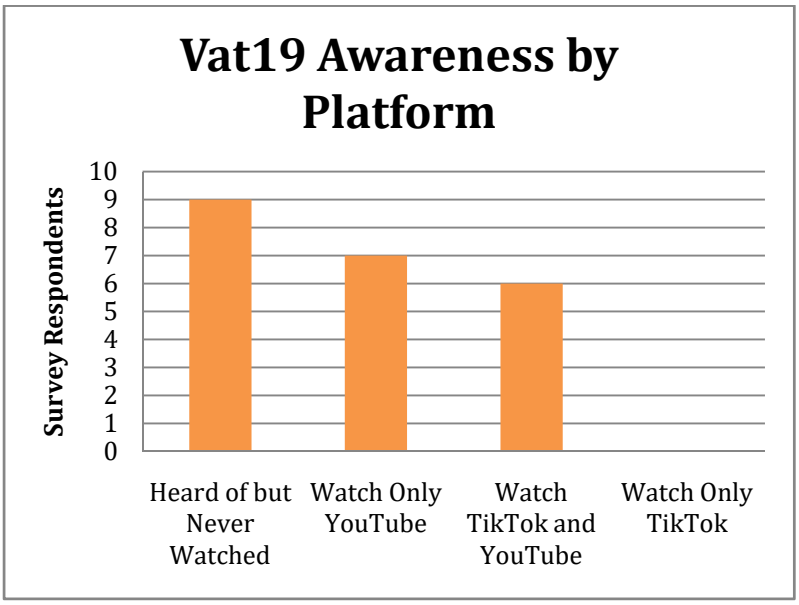

Figure 3 Vat19 Awareness by Platform

These results support the perception Vat19's owner, Jamie, shared at the outset of this project that 8 - 10% of people will have heard of Vat19 in a random survey. A finding that Vat19 had a more substantial market penetration and a larger general following on YouTube could indicate that promoting Vat19's non-monetized TikTok content would reduce views on Vat19's monetized YouTube content. The low market penetration and absence of TikTok-only viewers supports the assumption that increases in TikTok viewers

are more likely to come from the 90% of internet video consumers who are not currently aware of Vat19 than from the 8%-10% who are currently aware of Vat19 as a YouTube channel.

Video Comment Review

Comment review was used to determine the overlap between users commenting on Vat19's YouTube videos and users commenting on Vat19's TikTok videos as a proxy for overall user overlap between the two platforms. Excel 2019 Power Query Fuzzy name matching with a 90% match threshold was used to identify overlap between usernames commenting on Vat19's YouTube and Vat19's TikTok videos. 17,354 unique users commented on Vat19's TikTok videos, and 9,279 unique users commented on Vat19's YouTube videos. 876 TikTok users are matched in the YouTube users, 805 YouTube users are matched in the TikTok users (In some cases, one user on either platform may have multiple matches in the other). This indicates fewer than 5% of commenters on Vat19's TikTok videos are also commenters on Vat19's YouTube videos.

Sentiment analysis using the NRC Emotion Lexicon was performed on comments on both YouTube and TikTok. The sentiment of the comments skewed much higher in *anticipation* and *joy* on TikTok versus YouTube and much higher on *trust*, *sadness*, and *negative* on YouTube versus TikTok. Sentiment for *positive*, *disgust*, *fear*, *surprise*, and *anger* was consistent on both platforms. If the same viewers with similar intent were engaging on both platforms, I would infer that the sentiment should be similar between the comments on the two platforms. The divergence in sentiment between YouTube and TikTok therefore supports the premise that Vat19's audiences on TikTok and YouTube have a different intent from one another and driving traffic on TikTok is not likely to detract from views and engagement on YouTube.

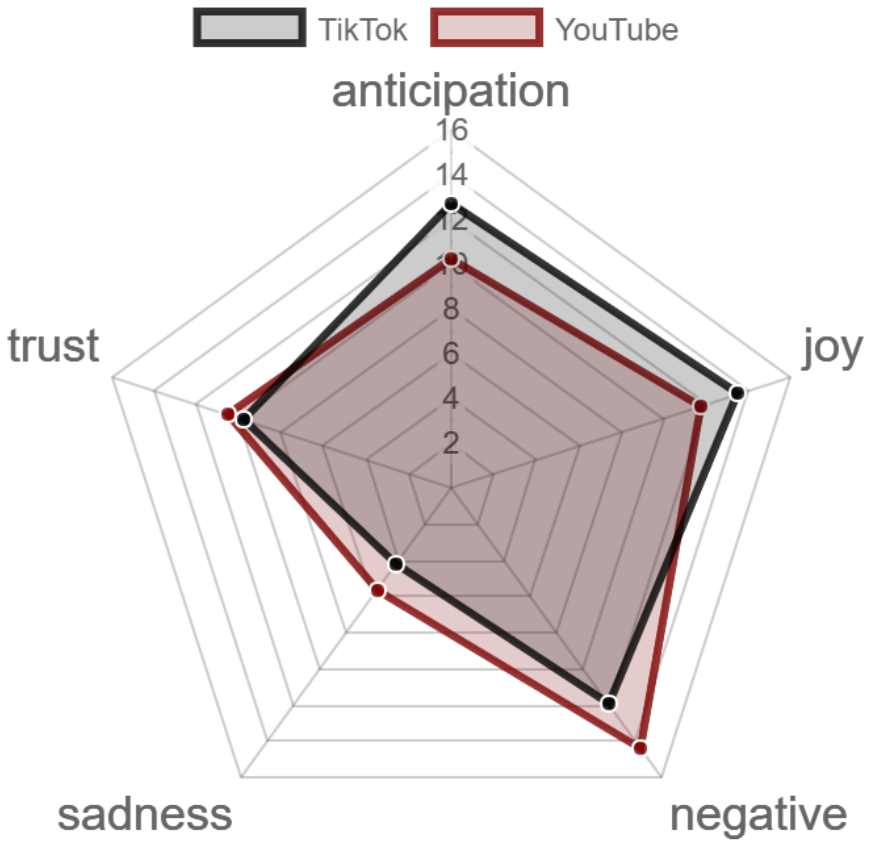

Figure 4 Sentiment Between TikTok and YouTube

Interviews

Although it is difficult to confirm the overlap, JJ (The social media management expert) advised that expanding to TikTok two years ago was an obvious net positive in engagement and there was no correlated dip in YouTube views on similar videos. JJ's expert opinion was that there is such a difference in platform usage that it was not likely that TikTok would be able to take away from YouTube. In JJ's portfolio, YouTube is prioritized as a long-form, ad-heavy platform while TikTok is focused on matching trends, show clips that are likely to get viral traction, and are part of a long-game to get the brand in front of a younger audience. The payoff on YouTube through clicks on ads and promos is measured in days; the expected payoff on TikTok is measured in years.

Literature

According to a 2020 analysis of social media users between the ages of 14 and 64, 93% of users who reported using TikTok also reported using YouTube, while fewer than 35% of YouTube users reported using TikTok (Kemp, 2021). However, as usage moves towards more mobile users, the way users engage with video content is likely to change in favor of shorter, trendier videos in the style of TikTok (Kemp, 2021). Further supporting the value proposition for Vat19, 29% of teenagers call TikTok their favorite social media app and parents rate TikTok as the top video platform for use by their children between the ages of 11 and 14 (Cooper,

2021). By the nature of many of Vat19's child-centric toy offerings, TikTok is likely to bring an expanded audience to the Vat19 brand beyond YouTube.

(2a) What are some common attributes of "viral" TikToks?

Summary

Based on the responses of a quarter of the survey respondents, there appears to be slightly more tolerance for relatively longer (based on platform standards) videos on YouTube and more tolerance for videos where someone is injured or embarrassed on YouTube. Beyond these stated preferences, there was no clear "recipe" for a viral TikTok based on content, hashtags, or featured performers. Further, TikTok virality appears to be more associated with a pattern in the algorithm that promotes videos on TikTok than on any attribute or group of attributes of the video itself.

Survey

Out of 257 respondents, 72 indicated that they were frequent users of TikTok. Results from those respondents were considered independently and as part of the overall responses to determine if the familiarity with the platform significantly skewed results. The overall guidance derived from these results was similar for both groups.

In order to make each sharing likelihood question comparable, I assigned "More Likely" a score of +1, "Less Likely" and score of -1, and "Doesn't Matter" a score of 0 in order to create a weighted net responder score regarding likelihood of sharing content. For TikTok, the five sharing criteria were: 1) The video is under 60 seconds long; 2) The video is over 60 seconds long; 3) The video is funny; 4) Someone in the video is hurt or embarrassed; 5) The video contains an exceptional feat (Tallest, longest, fastest, etc.). For YouTube, the five sharing criteria were: 1) The video is under 4 minutes long; 2) The video is over 10 minutes long; 3) The video is funny; 4) Someone in the video is hurt or embarrassed; 5) The video contains an exceptional feat (Tallest, longest, fastest, etc.). The difference in length of time for the sharing question is based on the difference in expected video lengths on each platform.

User responses showed a strong preference for short, funny videos on both YouTube and TikTok, a finding that emphasizes the natural fit between user interest and TikTok's under-60-second video format. Additionally, users expressed a much more noticeable dislike for videos where someone is hurt or embarrassed on YouTube as opposed to TikTok, with the preference for videos with exceptional feats positive but not as pronounced as the preference for funny videos.

Net Responder Scores

	All Respondents		Frequent TikTok	
Video Attribute	**TikTok**	**YouTube**	**TikTok**	**YouTube**
The video is under 60 seconds / 4 minutes long	43	95	25	31
The video is over 60 seconds / 10 minutes long	-29	-120	-6	-30
The video is funny	118	186	58	57
Someone in the video is hurt or embarrassed	-113	-149	-25	-32
The video contains an exceptional feat (Tallest, longest, fastest, etc.)	34	42	24	19

Figure 5 Net Responder Scores for Likelihood to Share Content

Video Content Review

@magdashotel was reviewed as an independent case study, with eight videos uploaded within an 11-minute span. These videos, with a similar theme, length, and music, had vastly different view counts with one video receiving over 2m views, and the other seven averaging 42,700 views. A Google search returns five of the other videos, but not the most viewed, and a search of Facebook and Twitter finds some references to the hotel's channel but few direct links to the video. This case reinforces the conclusion that TikTok operates more like a claw machine than a game of skill for creators.

Most viewers interact with the algorithm as the magic hand that curates the videos a user is most likely to enjoy and engage with. For creators, the algorithm has the ability to select videos and songs, either through an internal process or the deliberate machinations of TikTok decision makers, and ensure that content gets widespread viewership across the app regardless of title, content, and hashtags (Banjo, 2021). In the case of @magdashotel, the viral clip with 2m views and over 500,000 likes had neither a description nor any hashtags. this counterintuitive finding was the only notable difference between the viral video and the others on the channel.

@magdashotel		
Upload Time	**Description**	**Views**
2/12/21 12:53	#wearebored Stay open minded. Stay with us.	32,900
2/12/21 12:56	#wearebored Stay open minded. Stay with us.	29,200
2/12/21 12:58	#wearebored Stay open minded. Stay with us.	35,000
2/12/21 12:59		2,000,000
2/12/21 13:00	#wearebored Stay open minded. Stay with us.	45,200
2/12/21 13:02	#wearebored Stay open minded. Stay with us.	49,000
2/12/21 13:03	#wearebored Stay open minded. Stay with us.	58,800
2/12/21 13:04	#wearebored Stay open minded. Stay with us.	49,000

Figure 6 @magdashotel Views by Video

Similar to the @magdashotel case study, on Vat19's TikTok two videos about Vat19's "World's Largest Bath-bomb" were uploaded two and a half hours apart. The first video has 3m views and 278k likes, while the second has 11.6m views and 676k likes. These videos both used similar descriptions, similar content, and the same hashtags, but had substantially different results. For all of these video results, Vat19 did not engage in any outside promotion of specific TikTok videos during the study period.

There was significant variance in video lengths for the eighteen V (most viewed videos in a cluster) videos, ranging from 7 to

41 seconds with a mean of 21, but ten of eighteen V videos were the shortest video of the three video cluster and the other eight were neither the shortest nor the longest of the three video cluster. Comparing the V-1 and V+1 Duration, Likes, Shares, Views, and Comments to each video cluster's V showed an average of no deviation between the video durations. However, across all other measures the average quotient of the V divided by the V+1 showed a drop to below the quotient of the V divided by the V-1. In other words, the Likes, Shares, Views, and Comments on videos following a V video were most likely to be lower than each of those measures on the V-1 video. This hints at a "pull-back" by the algorithm following a viral video.

		V Quotients									
		Duration (Secs)		Likes		Shares		Views		Comments	
Cluster	Channel	V-1	V+1	V-1	V+1	V-1	V+1	V-1	V+1	V-1	V+1
1	vat19	2	1	16	17	95	54	22	57	13	7
2	vat19	1	1	2	20	10	99	4	45	6	18
3	vat19	1	1	40	260	174	959	30	73	71	325
4	vat19	1	1	23	15	6	18	22	17	5	9
5	target	0	0	178	122	369	134	76	56	45	37
6	target	1	1	11	8	15	7	1	1	57	14
7	target	1	1	65	64	82	75	69	78	6	14
8	chipotle	0	1	26	49	79	40	17	28	25	15
9	chipotle	1	1	13	62	15	523	11	46	16	47
10	chipotle	3	5	15	29	20	47	10	14	9	3
11	gymshark	3	2	57	63	5	12	59	70	32	56
12	gymshark	0	1	44	41	18	25	109	87	33	24
13	gymshark	1	2	9	118	1	36	7	61	12	72
14	magdashotel	1	1	167	126	84	79	57	44	52	56
15	youngnailsinc	1	0	49	107	41	76	44	78	20	25
16	youngnailsinc	0	0	70	13	10	4	142	35	10	7
17	youngnailsinc	0	0	25	2	2	0	54	10	193	11
*18	youngnailsinc	1	1	606	954	625	417	241	325	240	133
	Max	3	5	178	260	369	959	142	87	193	325
	Mean	1	1	48	66	60	129	43	47	35	44
	Min	0	0	2	2	1	0	1	1	5	3

Note: A number in a given field indicates the distance between that field and the V for the same video. A V with 1000 views surrounded by a V-1 with 100 views and a V+1 with 200 views would show a 10 and 5 respectively on this chart. The higher the number, the lower the absolute number of the field is.
*yougnailsinc cluster 18 was an outlier in the distance from its adjacent videos and was excluded from the summary fields at the bottom.

Figure 7 V Quotients for Videos Adjacent to Viral Videos

Interviews

Dr. Zeisner explained, "I crack up every time I'll spend 4 hours making a video...and then I'll spend 5 seconds making that jalapeno one, and it blows up." Dr. Zeisner's opinion as a creator and viewer is that the medium drives high quality in short videos, with her average viewership dropping on videos over 37 seconds long. For Dr. Zeisner, finding a theme or two (teaching and dogs) helped her focus her content and attract the kind of people

who were interested in the things she was saying.

JJ advised that their approach to determining success with a video on TikTok is likes, follows, and shares with little regard for view count. On TikTok, as soon as the video comes up in a user's feed, regardless of view length, a view is counted. On YouTube and Facebook it takes a user being engaged between 3 and 30 seconds to count as a view, making view counts on those platforms more indicative of engagement. As opposed to specific video elements to go viral, JJ recommended finding alignment between a brand's content (or intended content) and the trends at a given time and hop on those trends to get viewership and follows.

Literature

The prevailing guidance on TikTok virality is to trust the algorithm and follow the rules: keep it short, follow the trends, post often, and be authentic (Showfety, 2021; Simpson, 2020). TikTok is an opportunity for businesses to show a more human side through employees acting as public faces and by engaging customers where they are - on the app (Simpson, 2020).

TikTok's algorithm is analogous to a claw machine game. The player puts money into the machine, skillfully positions the claw over a desired item, presses a button, and the claw drops to the item. From here, the digital and physical mechanisms of the machine takeover using the claw machine's algorithm (Edwards, 2015). This algorithm, often automatically on new machines, determines how often a user can "win" a prize while still being profitable (Edwrds, 2015). The algorithm then manipulates the physical claw to make it more or less likely the prize will be retrieved (Edwards, 2015). In a venue where keeping people winning has outside value, like a bar where people staying present keeps them spending money on high margin food or drinks, the algorithm could be "loosened" to give out more prizes than the money coming in. In a venue where the machine is an isolated financial venture, the algorithm could be "tightened" to ensure the sum of payments significantly exceeds the value of the prizes. For the user, the process is blindly putting in money, manipulating the claw, pushing the button, and waiting hopefully, regardless of the algorithm at play.

For TikTok, the currency the viewer pays with is attention and the payout is entertainment. Because TikTok's goal is keeping viewers engaged on the platform, the payout is very "loose" to give viewers a sense that they are getting more entertainment than they "pay" for. However, the TikTok algorithm, which originated with a Chinese news app, has fundamentally different implications for viewers and creators (Zha, 2020). For viewers, the algorithm uses active behaviors (liking, commenting, sharing, following) and passive behaviors (non-interactions like scrolling past a video or leaving the app) to optimize the viewing experience in a way that prolongs engagement (Zha, 2020). The currency creators pay with is time. The time to conceive of, record, edit, post, and follow up on videos is what creators put into TikTok. The intermittent "prize" is "viral" success with hundreds of thousands of views, likes, and comments on a video. Like the claw machine, success feels like a skill and creators chase that success by trying to figure out the thing about the video that "hit" to get it again. In most cases, it is just the algorithm delivering a "prize" to keep the creator putting "money" into the machine.

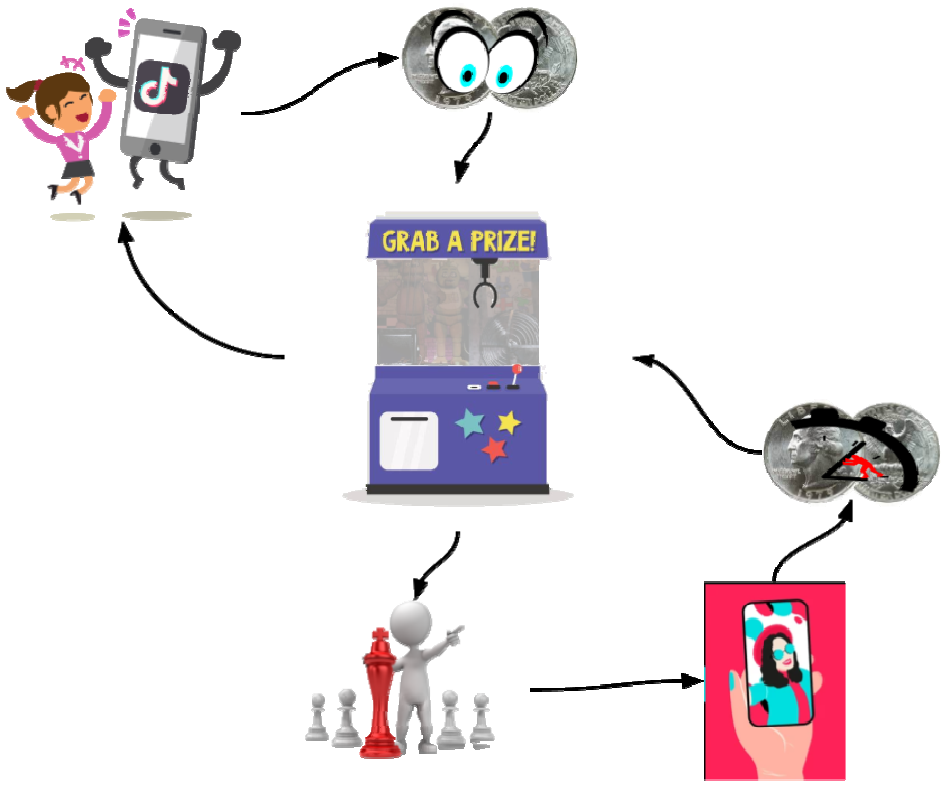

Figure 8 TikTok / Claw Machine Diagram

Evidence of this "claw machine" effect are further demonstrated in figure 9, where videos exceeding one million views cluster across different brands.

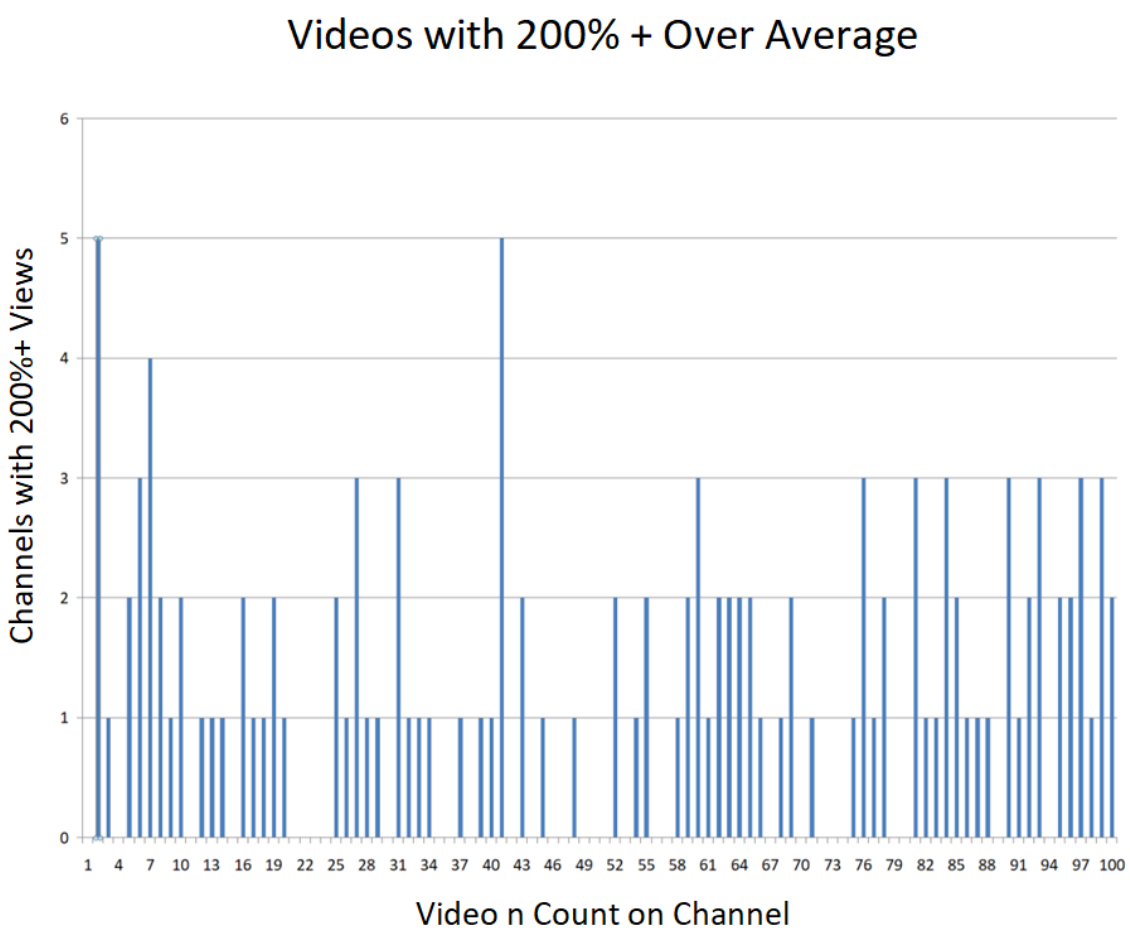

Figure 9 Videos with 200% or More Increase Over Preceding Average Views by Ordinal Video.

(2b) What are some common attributes of existing Vat19 media that align with the attributes of "viral" TikToks?

Based on the findings regarding the nature of viral TikToks, the answer to this research question is that Vat19 has some good examples of repurposing their existing content, such as their World's Largest Bath Bomb video, a video that was successful on YouTube three years ago and on TikTok this year. The analysis used to reach this conclusion could be useful on future platform considerations, but the lack of specific elements invalidates the premise.

(3) What role do personalities / brand loyalty play in social media video success?

Summary

About 1 in 30 comments mentioned one or more Vat19 employees appearing in the videos. All comments averaged a positive sentiment, but the scale of positivity varied significantly between the employee mentioned. Based on comments, current literature, and interview information, authenticity and personal connection are far more relevant on TikTok compared to YouTube. YouTube viewership is a passive

process of absorbing entertainment, where TikTok works more like a one-on-one relationship between the viewer and creator.

Video Comment Review

Of 30,913 comments, 1,056 mentioned one or more current employees of Vat19. After removing those with fewer than 100 mentions, 957 videos mentioned one or more of the top 5 most mentioned employees: Kyle Jamie, Eric, Sloan, and Daley. Sentiment analysis showed a wide variation in the context with which commenters referenced individuals, although there was consistency in how different commenters referenced the same individual. In other words, the sentiment of comments was consistently either favorable or unfavorable for a particular performer, but the sentiment for each performer was different.

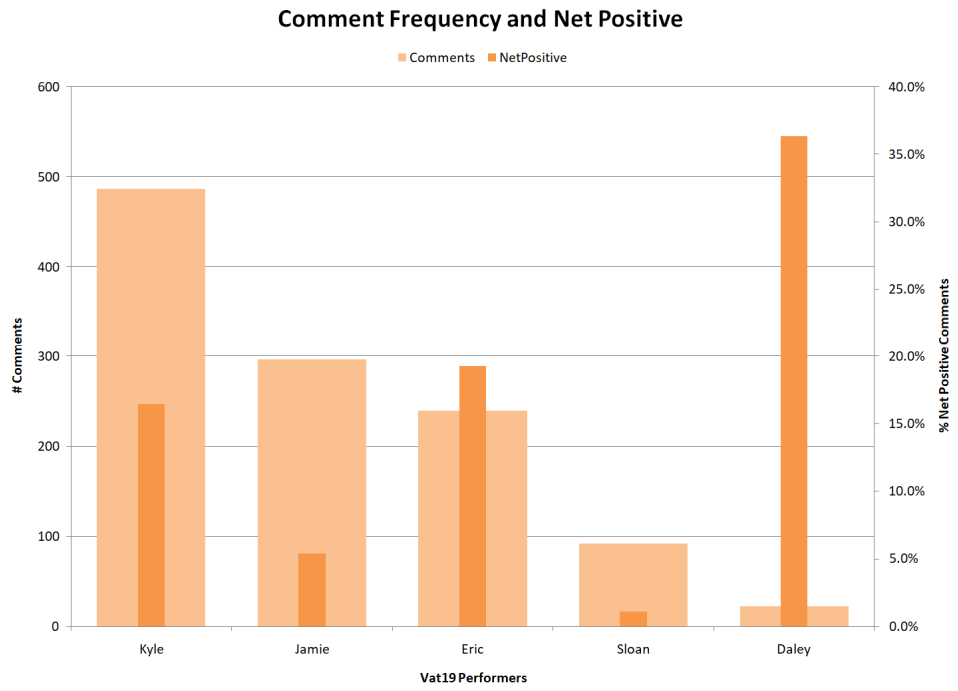

Figure 10 Frequency and Net Positive Sentiment

Video Content

On both YouTube and TikTok, views, comments, likes, and shares did not show variation based on features of the individuals.

Interviews

For JJ's approach, much of the material they distribute on social media is predicated on people who work as a brand. The individuals have a pre-existing fanbase curated by traditional media, and these personalities are hyped on other platforms. JJ described aligning the personalities with the platform, and emphasized the importance of using personalities with "younger" appeal on TikTok, which is a platform with a younger user base.

Dr. Zeisner's experience shows an important alignment with how TikTok categorizes creators and the content they put out. As Dr.

Zeisner explained, "I feel TikTok has slotted me into the funny, they really like it when I'm funny. I find it gets pushed out and then shared so much and then it blows up even more so I do find you do have to play with the algorithm a little bit, but I still try and be pretty true to who I am." Dr. Zeisner also characterized her own watching habits and that she gravitates towards certain creators, regardless of content, while also describing the double-edged nature of that approach. Dr. Zeisner described a creator she once followed who seemed to be chasing the algorithm and started producing a lot of negative content, "I just felt he was trying to pump out content."

Both JJ and Dr. Zeisner touched on a point that Dr. Zeisner described as, "As you try and pump out content, it's not authentic." That authenticity is rooted in expectations around a creator or brand's personality, and the backlash can be serious for creators who breach that audience trust. Jamie at Vat19 gave an example where both Vat19 and another popular YouTube channel did a very similar sponsored campaign for a major home products brand. For Vat19, the stunt aligned with the Vat19 brand of doing silly things as a commercial and Jamie ended up with his head shaved. For the other creator, known for exciting feats, there was a lot of "sellout" backlash for something that went against what viewers saw as that channel's "authentic" brand.

Literature

TikTok is a bi-directional interactive medium, where both creators and viewers engage with an expectation of interaction with the other. TikTok emphasizes the social aspect of social media with an innate expectation of users liking, sharing, and commenting, as opposed to the ubiquitous prompts in YouTube videos that imply these are more discretionary behaviors (Omar & Dequan, 2020). For brands, this suggests that aligning the people and personalities in videos with the personality of the brand will encourage engagement and reciprocation. TikTok appears to engage the kind of changes in personality expected of one-on-one relationships more so than other social media and social video platforms (Montag et al., 2021). For a brand reliant on experience with YouTube, this could be a fundamentally different approach to engagement. Understanding this change in dynamic is likely to have some impact on the overall success of moving to this platform as a more fundamental expansion of a brand's social media strategy.

Additional Literature

YouTube is a well-aged platform with over 15 years of accessible data regarding content, behaviors, and key performance indicators. TikTok is a relatively new platform with only a few years of meaningful scrutiny and a narrow set of analytics for creators and researchers. In spite of this gap in age, both platforms share a dearth of academic research for creators on the best approach to find the creator's audience. The most apparent reason for this is that it is a moving target which not only changes with each new platform but changes over time within the platform. In some cases, the result of the algorithm is to lead creators, especially those with a less refined audience, to change content and thumbnails to "chase" the algorithm (Pargin, 2021; Singh, 2020).

Some of the largest creators on YouTube, including MrBeast (Jimmy Donaldson), Veritasium (Derek Muller) and Mark Rober offer consistent advice on the current title and thumbnail recommendations: 1) Accurately describe the content; 2) Understand how the thumbnail and title will look in context; 3) Test variants (Parelli, 2021; Muller, 2021; Wall Street Journal, 2019). Where MrBeast and Veritasium diverge on the topic is a matter of academic approach versus practical. MrBeast emphasized the importance of a high-quality thumbnail and title that make a promise that the content will effectively fulfill, regardless of the effort, scale, or cost (Parelli, 2021). By contrast, Veritasium categorizes thumbnails and titles as "clickbait" in the strictest sense of the term: these features are enticements to potential viewers to interact with a video (Muller, 2021). However, the two come together on the advice to make good content, and accurately represent that content in the best light using thumbnails and titles (Muller, 2021; Parallel, 2021).

For TikTok, where the algorithm rewards social interactions, the approach is fundamentally different. One asset that Vat19 has in-house that other brands are outsourcing is the creation of original music (Waters, 2021; Vat19, 2020). On YouTube, copyrighted music playing over even parts of a video can result in the creator being unable to receive ad revenue from YouTube for the entire video. In contrast, since TikTok videos are not directly monetized by most creators, the use of copyrighted music is done through licensing between TikTok and the copyright holder (Johnson, 2021). Additionally, brands are finding that the combination of their own licensed music and delegating commercial creation to independent TikTok users is a recipe for high sales at virtually no additional cost (Waters, 2021).

Recommendations

Vat19 is in an unusual place with their business model and how it intertwines with a social video platform. Many businesses are exclusively "YouTube" brands that make all of their revenue centered on their YouTube videos. Many businesses have non-video-production models where money is made from online shopping, brick-and-mortar stores, or subscriptions. Very few businesses intertwine the business of making videos that draw revenue and also running an online store in the way that Vat19 does, and none do so at the same scale. This makes the task of recommendations challenging, because there is not a clear benchmark to compare to for this singular model.

Vat19 should pursue getting a verification badge on TikTok to assure users they are interacting with the real Vat19. A TikTok search for "Vat19" accounts returns over a dozen accounts pretending to be Vat19. TikTok's guidance on being verified is vague, but the benefits of verification are both standing out from the fake accounts and preventing Vat19's fans from being taken advantage of by scam accounts (TikTok, 2019). One PR firm suggests the three-prong approach of producing regular content, getting outside press, and engaging with users on the platform (McCray, 2021). For Vat19, which has a limited media footprint outside of YouTube, outside press could also be an opportunity to attract a broader fanbase to Vat19's videos and products. One example is solicitations to publications and list-creators to include Vat19's content. For many outlets, these lists are a low-cost, low-effort content and Vat19's performance for views and follows outperforms many of the brands that routinely appear on these lists.

Based on evidence of TikTok's "claw machine" operating model, Vat19 should continue to do what they have been doing for almost two years: Consistently post quality videos. There does not appear to be a meaningful difference in views, likes, and engagements based on specific characters, actors, products, or video structures. Vat19's top performing videos are a mix of recycled YouTube content and made-for-TikTok content. The number of Vat19 TikTok videos with over 1m views indicates that this approach to consistently posting is working and mirrors the approaches of other brands with similar successful campaigns.

Vat19 has an opportunity to use TikTok as their interactive media strategy while keeping YouTube as a broadcast platform. The unique value proposition of TikTok is that, through stitching, duets, and sound clips, TikTok allows users to interact and collaborate with larger and more popular creators. Where Vat19 has had very little positive result from interacting on YouTube through comments, TikTok provides a platform that encourages interaction without risking the ad and sponsor supported content on YouTube. Further, as evidenced by engagement and sentiment in the comments on both YouTube and TikTok, TikTok creates an opportunity to showcase individual personalities under the Vat19 brand in a lower-risk manner than on YouTube. YouTube content is more permanent, where TikTok is more ephemeral with content being consumed near the time of posting and then forgotten.

At the outset of this project, we were optimistic about the opportunity to conduct in-person interviews and focus groups with an incentive and expected a higher response

rate for surveys. A customer survey focused on Vat19's current customers along with focus groups based on Vat19's tours would both likely be good opportunities for Vat19 to gather further insight into how their brand resonates with their most engaged customers, above and beyond the questions posed in this project surrounding specific platform usage.

Vat19 has a brand, product, and reputation that, for those aware of them, are synonymous with creative video production. It is reductive to limit the description of Vat19's model to making commercials people want to watch, because many Vat19 video series center on personalities and projects that are product adjacent without a pitch for a specific product. Vat19 makes content people want to watch, and sometimes that content includes product pitches. Based on the minimal general market penetration and name recognition across the internet, Vat19 has the freedom to dabble in all current and future platforms with little chance of reducing monetized content and a high chance of expanding reach and recognition. Based on Vat19's success with the YouTube model, following those standards to other platforms and looking for content that generates views, likes, comments, and shares is a strategy supported by the literature and data reviewed in this project.

Discussion

This process began with an open invitation to Jamie Salvatori at Vat19 to explore any pressing topic in his organization. Settling on platform launches resulted in a winding path between marketing and interacting theories and delving into under-utilized data sources to put an academic lens in front of what is widely regarded as senseless entertainment. Over the 14 months of this project, the soft literature being published as blogs, amateur research, and marketing guides was rapidly expanding. Much of the literature included in findings simply did not exist when this project and initial literature review took place. The intent of the structure of this project was to provide both current insight and a framework for future platform considerations. A key challenge in completing this project was the constant finding of new rabbit holes that further expanded the usable findings. These paths included new information about social media algorithms including TikTok, legal filings around the usage of consumer data on Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram, and a number of news articles about real and contrived "Viral TikTok Challenges" that would be enough to produce an entire standalone paper about the role of traditional media and social media in promoting viral stories about viral challenges that do not actually exist.

I encountered several emerging social media researchers using the TikTok platform to create and share findings about TikTok's algorithm including impressive research by Abbie Richards (@tofology) and Olivia Little on how the TikTok algorithm can promote extremist content. Ironically cited for an academic paper of this size about using TikTok, there is a tremendous breadth and depth of research coming out of TikTok and Instagram that use the short-video format of those platforms to educate users about each platform respectively. Academia in the 21st century has lagged behind public information consumption leaving a gap that the creation of this paper made very clear: peer-reviewed research on social media is eclipsed almost entirely by the high-quality, public-reviewed research available via YouTube, TikTok, and even Wikipedia. Where this paper focuses on Vat19's specific use case for TikTok, there is a clear opportunity for future research on the information quality of crowd-sourced and crowd-promoted social media research as it compares to traditional peer-reviewed research publication.

Overall, the process of this project was a balance of taking the known unknowns about Vat19's viewership overlap between two platforms, the "magic" recipe for videos, and the interaction between viewers and Vat19 and combining them with the unknown unknowns surrounding tools and techniques for exploring the key questions at hand. The tools and techniques used to analyze comment and video data relied on experimentation with different data export tools and a lot of trial and error around finding meaningful data among a lot of unsuitably noisy data.

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Appendix A: Survey

Introduction:

Welcome! This survey will help us to understand market reach and content preferences for social media video platforms. Please read the questions and answer honestly. Test questions are included in order to assess valid responses. Participation in this survey is voluntary and anonymous. No personal information or metadata, beyond the demographic questions asked in the survey, is retained with your responses to this survey. Your engagement in this survey is by your consent, and you may withdraw consent at any time by discontinuing the survey without penalty. Thank you in advance for taking the time to participate in this survey!

Demographic Questions:

Which age group best describes you?

1.Under 18
2.18-24
3.25-34
4.35-54
5.Above 54

Do you regularly interact with social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, etc.) using English language?

1.Yes
2.No

With which option below do you most closely identify?

1.Prefer not to answer
2.Non-Binary
3.Female
4.Male

From what country are you currently accessing the internet?

How often do you use the internet to access websites, post / read social media, or watch videos?

1.Rarely
2.Once per week
3.Once per day
4.Multiple times per day

When was the last time you completed an internet survey about brand awareness or social media?

1.Never
2.Within the past week
3.Within the past month
4.Within the past year
5.More than a year ago

Platform Questions:

Platform usage - How often do you engage in the following behaviors?

	Never	Rarely	Once per Week	Once per Day	Multiple Times per Day

Watch videos on YouTube	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Comment on videos on YouTube	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Watch videos on TikTok	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Comment on videos on TikTok	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Watch videos on Facebook	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Comment on videos on Facebook	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

The following questions depend on your current knowledge and should not be looked up. There are no wrong answers, and the intent is to understand your current awareness of certain brands or creators. Do you agree to answer these questions solely based on your own knowledge and experience without outside help?

1.Yes
2.No

Even if you are not a regular YouTube user, please attempt to answer the following questions about the YouTube platform based on your own knowledge, experience, and understanding, without consulting outside sources. Please select the option that best describes your experience only on YouTube with the stated brand or personality. Q: How familiar are you with the following YouTube Channels?

	Never heard of it	Heard of it but never watched	Watched but never interacted	Currently subscribed
TroomTroom Wow	❑	❑	❑	❑
Robilly Robles	❑	❑	❑	❑
Vat19	❑	❑	❑	❑
Ryan's World	❑	❑	❑	❑
Zoom Wow Games	❑	❑	❑	❑

Sharing includes social media, direct messaging, or telling others about the video offline. Each question should be considered alone as the only factor in whether or not you would share a video. Q: Do the following content factors make it more likely or less likely you will share a YouTube video with others?

	Less Likely	Doesn't Matter	More Likely
The video is under 4 minutes long	❑	❑	❑
The video is over 10 minutes long	❑	❑	❑
The video is funny	❑	❑	❑
Someone in the video is hurt or embarrassed	❑	❑	❑
The video contains an exceptional feat (Tallest, longest, fastest, etc.)	❑	❑	❑

Q: How often do you engage in the following behavior on YouTube?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Subscribe to a channel unprompted	❑	❑	❑	❑
Subscribe to a channel when prompted by the video	❑	❑	❑	❑
Like a video unprompted	❑	❑	❑	❑
Like a video when prompted by the video	❑	❑	❑	❑
Comment on a video unprompted	❑	❑	❑	❑
Comment on a video when prompted by the video	❑	❑	❑	❑

Even if you are not a regular TikTok user, please attempt to answer the following questions about the TikTok platform based on your own knowledge, experience, and understanding, without consulting outside sources. Please select the option that best describes your experience only on TikTok with the stated brand or personality. Q: How familiar are you with the following TikTok Creators?

	Never heard of it	Heard of it but never watched	Watched but never interacted	Currently Follow
@charlidamelio (CharliD'Amelio)	❑	❑	❑	❑
@robillyrobles (RobillyRobles)?	❑	❑	❑	❑
@therealgushers (Gushers)	❑	❑	❑	❑
@vat19 (Vat 19)	❑	❑	❑	❑
@zoomwowgames (ZoomWow Games)	❑	❑	❑	❑

Sharing includes social media, direct messaging, or telling others about the video offline. Each question should be considered alone as the only factor in whether or not you would share a video. Q: Do the following content factors make it more likely or less likely you will share a TikTok video with others?

	Less Likely	Doesn't Matter	More Likely
The video is under 60 seconds long	❑	❑	❑
The video is over 60 seconds long	❑	❑	❑
The video is funny	❑	❑	❑
Someone in the video is hurt or embarrassed	❑	❑	❑
The video contains an exceptional feat (Tallest, longest, fastest, etc.)	❑	❑	❑

Survey Notes:

Users responding "Under 18" to "Which age group best describes you?" were routed to a thank you page and did not complete the survey. The scope of this project was limited to subjects of unknown ages (YouTube and TikTok comments) and those 18 and older for knowing direct respondents.

Users responding "No" to "Do you regularly interact with social media...using English language?" were routed to a thank you page and did not complete the survey. The scope of the survey was

limited to users to interact predominantly in English to align with the predominant viewership of Vat19 media.

Users responding “No” to “Do you agree to answer these questions solely based on your own knowledge and experience without outside help?” were allowed to complete the survey, but their responses were excluded from analysis.

In the matrix “How familiar are you with the following YouTube Channels?” The channels Robily Robles and Zoom Wow Games were made up and designed to not closely mimic actual popular channels. Responses that included “Watched but never interacted” and “Currently subscribed” for these two channels were eliminated from analysis.

In the matrix “How familiar are you with the following TikTok Channels?” The channels @robillyrobles and @zoomwowgames were made up and designed to not closely mimic actual popular channels. Responses that included “Watched but never interacted” and “Currently Follow” for these two channels were eliminated from analysis.

Appendix B: Videos

Video	Channel	Date	Length	Description	Likes	Shares	Views	Comment	Music	Screen Text	Narrative	People
https://www.tiktok.com/@rat19/video/6917354680041491717	vat19	1/13/21 21:09		We filled our living room with glow in the dark putty and played the floor is radioactive! #putty #sillyputty #glowinthedark #theflooristlavachallenge	41600	72	218500	426	Vat19 - original sound			
https://www.tiktok.com/@rat19/video/6915505670196382981	vat19	1/8/21 21:34		When you gotta flaminGO, you gotta go. @gottagoflamingo #vat19 #flamingo #comedy #poop #toys #moosetoys	718100	3883	1.3E+07	2888	Vat19 - original sound			
https://www.tiktok.com/@rat19/video/6915153013271252230	vat19	1/7/21 22:45		One of these is not like the other. #fallingwaterputty #putty #sillyputty @crazyaaronsputtyofficial #fallingwater #water #timelapse #illusion #drinks	44900	41	572300	224	L.Dre - Steven Universe			
https://www.tiktok.com/@rat19/video/6948138986909011205	vat19	4/6/21 20:07		Make your own bouncy ball!! #diy #ball #bouncyball #vat19 #putty #toystore	33900	47	259400	148	Devinney - Summer - Instrumental			
https://www.tiktok.com/@rat19/video/6947038443855711493	vat19	4/3/21 20:57		We built the World's Largest Bath Bomb - PART TWO #bathbomb #worldslargest #spring #pool #diy #build #vat19 #beautyproducts #soap	675500	4640	1.2E+07	2720	Vat19 - original sound			

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Introduction

Thank you for your time to do this interview. This interview is part of my Doctoral capstone for Vanderbilt. All or part of the questions and answers we go through today may or may not be included, along with your identity / username, in the final product which is publicly available through Vanderbilt's library. Are you okay with my recording this interview and using your information in this project?

Background

Username
TikTok Followers
TikTok Likes
YouTube Subscribers
Contact method
Interview method
Type of Channel (Brand, Individual)

Questions

Interview Question
How did you get started on TikTok?
Would you recommend that approach to others?
Do you think the medium drives better content?
Why / Why Not?
What makes a good TikTok video, from a creator / user perspective?
Have you experimented with different lengths, content types, or engagement prompts on your channel?
Do you have direct knowledge / interaction with the metrics on your channel?
Which specific metrics do you focus on for your TikTok channel?
How often / why / (probe for reasoning).
Are there metrics outside of the platform that you follow as well?
How often / why / (probe for reasoning).
How are the analytic metrics you follow on TikTok similar to or different from the analytic metrics you follow on YouTube?
Are there any other suggestions you have that we haven't covered for how to be successful at TikTok?
Are there any other TikTok channels you could put me in contact with whose input would be useful for this project?

Conclusion

Thank you again for your time. Your answers are a valuable part of this process and I really appreciate you sharing with me. If you have any follow up questions or concerns, feel free to contact me via email at --.

Glossary

Facebook A social media platform founded in 2006 which allows users to "friend" one another and engage in a community of sharing text, articles, websites, pictures, and videos within a connected network. Consumers can engage producers with comments, likes, and shares of the content.

Duet (TikTok) Video made side-by-side with another user's video, usually with either a reaction or a feigned interaction between the two videos.

Instagram A social media platform founded in 2010 and later acquired by Facebook. Instagram's focus is based on "stories" where a user posts a picture or short video and it is available for a limited window of time before being archived. While the site does allow likes and comments on content, Instagram content is more push from the producer to the consumer than other platforms which encourage interaction between the producer and consumer.

Like In the facebook ecosystem, likes can either indicate a type of subscription where a user opts-in to see more content from a producer, or they can signal affirmation of a consumer's appreciation for a specific piece of content. At the time of this writing, Facebook does not offer a "dislike" indicator, though a number of other platforms allow consumers to like or dislike (typically thumbs up / thumbs down or arrow up / arrow down) a specific piece of content.

Retweet When a twitter user shares another users message in order to boost reach.

Stitch (TikTok) Using another user's introduction to make an original video. The video is usually structured as a user creating a base video with the introduction "Tell me about ____, I'll go first..." and the new user picks up with their response telling about the topic.

Subscribe(r) YouTube channels allow consumers of content the option of subscribing in order to be funneled content produced by that specific channel. This creates a creator / consumer relationship and also influences other videos a consumer will be presented with. Subscriber counts are a key advertising and sponsorship metric for determining the likelihood of consumers engaging with a video, and as a function of that, the sponsored product.

TikTok A short-form video sharing platform founded in 2016 that promotes one-to-one user interactions with minimal production. TikTok is the product of combining a news recommendation algorithm with a 15-second lip-sync platform.

Yeet To throw something, usually while shouting "Yeet" may also be used as an expression of excitement or approval with or without the context of something being thrown.

YouTube A video sharing platform founded in 2005 and later acquired by search engine pioneer Google. Starting in 2007, YouTube began allowing users to "monetize" videos. With this advent, users could generate content and, in exchange for playing short video ads or displaying small banner ads on the video, YouTube would pay the user a portion of the ad revenue.