

New Content Formats in Digital Communications

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Нови формати на съдържание в дигиталната комуникация

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Abstract

The emergence of new media channels goes hand in hand with the advent of new content formats and their subsequent rise in popularity. The digital era brings forth numerous new formats, with short video content currently emerging as the winner in terms of interaction, popularity, and return on investment (ROI) for content creators. This analysis examines a combination of psychological, lifestyle, and practical factors to explain why online users find this type of content so appealing and why the number of content creators joining this trend is increasing in the coming years. Social media with short video formats is studied from the perspectives of attachment theory and the socio-technical approach, which are useful in revealing the psychological motivators for online users actively seeking this type of content. Scientific literature about subjective feelings of engagement provides guidance on the fragmented workday and the usefulness of short-format content to fill small breaks in a busy day. From a practical standpoint, considering recent statistics on mobile usage, short-format content, especially vertical video, is faster, easier, and cheaper to create. At the same time, it is highly appealing, easy to distribute, and convenient to consume on smartphones without rotating the screen.

Keywords: digital marketing, content marketing, short-format content, vertical video, attachment theory, socio-technical approach

Резюме

Появата на нови медийни канали върви ръка за ръка с настъпването на нови формати на съдържание и тяхното последващо покачване на популярността. Цифровата ера довежда множество нови формати, като кратките видео съдържания в момента са победител в термини на взаимодействие, популярност и възвращаемост на инвестицията (ROI) за създателите на съдържание. Този анализ разглежда комбинация от психологически, лайфстайл и практически фактори, за да обясни защо онлайн потребителите намират този тип съдържание толкова привлекателен и защо нараства броят на създателите на съдържание, които се присъединяват към този тренд в бъдещите години. Социалните медии с кратки видео формати се изучават от гледна точка на теорията за прикачване и социотехническият подход, които са полезни за разкриване на психологическите мотиватори на потребителите онлайн да търсят активно този тип съдържание. Научната литература по темата за субективното усещане за заетост предоставя насоки за фрагментиран работен ден и полезността на съдържанието с кратък формат за запълване на малките прекъсвания в заетия ден. От практическа гледна точка, като се

има предвид най-скорошната статистика за мобилното използване, съдържанието с кратък формат, особено вертикалното видео, е по-бързо, по-лесно и по-евтино за създаване, но същевременно е много привлекателно, лесно за разпространение и удобно за консумиране на смартфон без завъртане на екрана.

Ключови думи: дигитален маркетинг, маркетинг на съдържание, съдържание с кратък формат, вертикално видео, теория на прикачването, социотехнически подход

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Introduction

The creation and dissemination of content to engage the audience are fundamental in the media, brand marketing, and influencer spheres. Over the years, the channels used, and the content formats made available, by various channels have changed. From articles in magazines to blog posts, videos, stories, and reels, content creators and marketing experts experiment to discover the most engaging channels and formats. They, of course, adapt to changes in the audience's lifestyle and preferences (Hsee et al., 2010). In the last 50 years, there has been an apparent acceleration in daily life or at least a perception of such change in dynamism. At the same time, the role of the content consumer has undergone a profound change. From a passive consumer of daily content offered by newspapers or radio, the consumer has become an active and discerning chooser, deciding what and when to consume.

Given the seemingly endless content available to everyone online, consumers face different challenges today compared to the end of the last century. There is also the phenomenon of a sense of busyness, compelling people to consume content in every free moment. In combination, the above contribute to the boom in popularity and effectiveness, in terms of engagement, of short content formats.

Research Objectives

This study aims to draw on scientific literature as well as current internet usage statistics to uncover the reasons for the significant rise in popularity of new, short content formats. To achieve this goal, the new content formats are first described, and then their assumptions to become so popular are analyzed through the lenses of attachment theory, socio-technical approach, the sense of busyness, and some practical trends regarding the use of mobile devices.

Chronology of Popular Content Formats

The number of communication channels and the content formats they offer have significantly increased over the years. Until the commercialization of radio in the first half of the 20th century, the only mass communication media were newspapers and magazines. They typically offered similar content formats, namely various volumes of text. Technological advancements later allowed for the printing of images, enriching these communication channels with formats containing combinations of text and images.

With the advent of radio in the early 20th century, audio content formats were born. These formats include news broadcasts, talk shows, and others, and consumers had to find their desired frequency on their receivers to consume content at specific times. The popularity of this new media was so widespread that by 1940, a study showed that 83% of Americans owned

a radio and consumed content through it (Craig, 2004). The establishment of television in the 1950s for the first time offered audio-visual formats to the audience, quickly dominating households worldwide, and radio was no longer the most popular mass media. The last drastic change in mass media occurred at the end of the 20th century with the popularization of the internet. The content formats that gained popularity on the web were news websites, blogs, and videos. However, before Web 2.0, the user remained largely a passive consumer of content but now could choose the content they consumed. Thanks to Web 2.0, users started communicating with each other and sharing information, marking the beginning of a continuously increasing flow of information in the online space that we witness today. Around the same time, the first social networks emerged, where users had control over their profiles and began "posting on their walls." Social networks fundamentally transformed interpersonal communication. In 2022, almost 60% of the world's population uses social networks, and the average time spent on them is 147 minutes per day, reaching up to 248 minutes per day in some countries (Dixon, 2022; DataReportal, 2023).

The new content formats popularized through social networks are most commonly visual or audio-visual. There is also an evolution in these formats concerning the social networks themselves. Static images give way to dynamic ones (GIFs). In 2013, Snapchat captivated users with its "Stories" format, allowing the saving and sharing of temporary images or short videos (around 15 seconds). The success of the format in terms of user engagement led other major social networks like Facebook and Instagram to adopt it, and users can easily edit their "Stories" and apply augmented reality filters. In 2017, the internet community was conquered by a format introduced by the Chinese company TikTok, representing short videos with an audio component. The uniqueness of this format lies in the editing and enhancement tools offered by the platform, as well as the free choice of audio from numerous songs and excerpts from popular television productions. This makes user-generated video content (UGC) quick and easy to create, simultaneously diverse and easy to consume. What is intriguing about these new and popular content formats is their type, namely short vertical videos.

The popularity of these new content formats is due to a combination of psychological, lifestyle, and practical factors that lead users to prefer short and engaging content. Psychological factors have been extensively studied in the scientific literature, but experimental evidence mostly comes from participants in Asian countries, as short video content platforms are significantly more popular in that part of the world. It is useful to analyze

the psychological reasons for preferring short video content through the lens of established theoretical frameworks.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory initially focused on the need for protection and the behaviors that children seek and maintain in proximity to those who care for them. Attachment refers to a strong emotional connection that can develop between people, groups, and other objects (Bowlby, 2000). This theory is widely accepted in psychology and marketing and serves as a useful framework for studying various human relationships (e.g., platonic and romantic) as well as attachment to non-material services. Lately, this theory has been applied to explain the crucial role of attachment in stimulating individuals strongly connected to social media (Kim et al., 2015).

Attachment manifests in various forms, notably interpersonal, site-based, and group-oriented. Interpersonal attachment centers on personal attraction among individuals; site-based attachment underscores the functional dependence on social media, while group attachment emphasizes the identification of group members with the goals and values of the group. Empirical evidence suggests that interpersonal attachment exerts a greater influence on addiction to platforms with short video formats than site-based attachment (Zhang et al., 2019). One possible explanation draws on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (Maslow, 1954). This theory posits that individuals experience dissatisfaction once their physiological needs are met, prompting them to pursue new needs, such as social needs. Using smartphones to fulfill entertainment needs and foster interpersonal relationships can be viewed as addressing psychological and social needs, respectively. Consequently, site-based attachment corresponds to psychological needs, while interpersonal attachment addresses social needs. Users are likely to seek interpersonal attachment since social needs represent higher-order requirements.

The Socio-Technical Approach

Anxiety in social interactions and social isolation are identified as social factors positively influencing interpersonal attachment. Personalization and entertainment are recognized as technical factors positively impacting site-based attachment. Previous studies on social media addiction heavily emphasize social factors like social presence, social support, and loneliness, paying less attention to the technical dimension. Recent research, however, reveals that both the social and technical features of short-form video applications positively influence people's attachment to these applications. On one hand, short-form video applications enable users to expand interpersonal communication and find new friends, thereby fostering

interpersonal attachment. On the other hand, the unique technical characteristics and features of short video applications assist users in easily viewing and uploading various interesting video clips, making them functionally dependent on these applications (Zhang et al., 2019).

Sense of Busyness

The increasing perception of busyness in daily life and the key role of mobile devices in it create favorable conditions for the popularization of shorter content formats in the online space. The working hours of the average worker in Western Europe and the USA have drastically reduced over the last 150 years. During the same period, leisure time has gradually but steadily increased (Huberman & Minns, 2007). The trend continues in the same direction, yet despite this, in response to surveys, people claim to feel increasingly busy. The authors argue that a busy and overloaded lifestyle, rather than a leisurely one, has become an ambitious symbol of status. A series of studies show that positive status in response to busyness and a lack of free time is guided by perceptions that a busy person possesses desirable human capital traits (e.g., competence and ambition) and is scarce and sought after in the job market. This study reveals an alternative form of conspicuous consumption, acting by shifting the focus from the value of goods and the lack of them to the value and scarcity of individuals (Bellezza et al., 2016). Ultimately, from a psychological perspective, feelings and perceptions define our reality. Even if objectively people are not busier today, the subjective perception of busyness manifests as a real issue.

Mobile Devices

Mobile devices, and smartphones in particular, have become an integral part of life. As of 2022, over 6.5 billion people use smartphones, and the average time spent on the smartphone per day is 3 hours and 15 minutes (Howarth, 2023; Taylor, 2023). Interestingly, most of the time spent on the phone occurs during the workday, with more than half of that time spent on the internet, with social networks being the most popular online destinations. These statistics suggest a workday filled with short distractions leading to fragmented concentration. This is where short-form content formats, especially short videos, fit in, providing an opportunity for quickly consuming engaging, entertaining, or informative content.

Practical Factors

Easy to Create and Easy to Consume. Short video content has become extremely popular not only due to consumer preferences but also thanks to content creators such as influencers and brands. The efforts, time, and financial resources required for creating long videos are largely impractical when there are free platforms offering tools for creating short

videos with a rich selection of audio-visual effects. Generating and sharing this type of content takes minutes, and user engagement is higher. Regarding marketing communication, consumers prefer video productions no longer than 3 minutes (Bump, 2022). This presents an opportunity for content creators to rethink their content marketing strategy, and one-third of marketing specialists are already taking advantage of it, claiming that short video formats show the best engagement and return on investment. According to a HubSpot study, 21% of marketing specialists who have not created short video materials in 2022 plan to join this trend in 2023 (Iskiev, 2022).

A distinctive feature of the most popular short video content on social media is vertical alignment. In recent years, the portrait or vertical screen format has started replacing the traditional landscape or horizontal format, becoming the standard for mobile video production and consumption. A series of studies on the effectiveness of video formats indicates that mobile vertical video ads enhance user interest and engagement compared to horizontal video ads. Mobile users process vertical video ads more smoothly than horizontal ones on a cognitive level. The primary reason for this lies in the fact that mobile users exert less effort when watching vertical video ads on a full-screen smartphone, as viewing vertical video does not require rotating the phone. Researchers also identify a moderating effect of age on the processing of video ads. Younger participants process vertical video more easily than their older counterparts, likely due to the early age at which they interact with smartphones (Mulier et al., 2021).

Conclusion

With the advancement of technologies, there is an observable shift in the formats of content that gain popularity among consumers. In a relatively short period, the most popular media channels transitioned from newspapers through radio and television to digital ones. Digital technology enables the richest variety of content formats, and a rapid evolution of their popularity is evident, even in just the last few years. A combination of psychological, lifestyle, and practical factors leads to the widespread popularization of short video formats with vertical orientation in 2022—a trend that is undoubtedly set to continue into 2023. Considering the speed at which consumers change their preferences from one format to another and the pace of technological development, we can be certain that a new contender for consumer attention will emerge very soon. Given the progress made in building the metaverse over the past year, the next captivating format is likely to be associated with augmented or virtual reality.

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