

Building Optimism Through Inspirational YouTube Videos During the Pandemic: An Empirical Examination

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Abstract

This article presents the results of content categorisation and measurement of the effects of YouTube videos released publicly by commercial entities during the pandemic. The videos in question contain inspirational content concerning prosocial behaviour in response to COVID-19 and are released through the big companies' official YouTube accounts. In the first study, the authors analysed the content of videos from various companies. While the videos encompassed different presentations of actions taken and messages expressing optimism, those that conveyed empathetic communication and human values were predominantly featured. We categorised the findings into action-oriented, human values-oriented and empathic-oriented content for the selection of videos in the subsequent study. In the subsequent experimental study, aimed at understanding the effects, we asked participants to watch and evaluate the videos selected from the initial study. The results demonstrated that empathic-oriented content had the highest impact on individuals, leading to increases in five measures of inspiration: aspiring to become a better person, engaging in acts of kindness towards others, seeking what truly matters in life, striving to live a more fulfilling life and aligning personal goals.

Keywords

Inspirational media, public communication, media communication, COVID-19 pandemic, effects of communication

Introduction

This article presents our analysis of public communication through inspirational media delivered by commercial entities during an unforeseen situation. We specifically selected YouTube videos released by a set of big companies during the challenging situation of the COVID-19 pandemic and studied them to

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assess their empathetic role in shaping public mood. Although the messages in these videos are intended for the companies' audiences, they are distributed through a social media platform that is accessible to the public. As a result, the content of these videos reaches people and, to a certain degree, influences their perception with a different message, such as empathetic and optimistic content. This is particularly significant considering the health-related information and fatalities of the virus, the prevalence of misinformation and conspiracy theories, and the sociopolitical crisis created by the pandemic.

During challenging situations, the content of public communication remains crucial due to its significant impact. The content can take various forms, such as instructional or persuasive content, each serving its own purpose during a crisis. In this study, we emphasise the importance of inspirational content, as highlighted by other researchers. Studies concerning media content focusing on inspirational content have been carried out in the conceptualisation of eudaimonic media (Rigby & Ryan, 2016; Wirth et al., 2012), including comparison with the conceptualisation of hedonic media (Bartsch & Hartmann, 2017; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Roth et al., 2014). Likewise, the role of inspirational media in building an affective and transcendental feeling was also carried out by researchers (Dale et al., 2017, 2020; Rieger & Klimmt, 2019) to provide information about types of content in general contextual situations. Similarly, we hypothesised that inspirational content presented by commercial entities during the pandemic might also have evoked an affective feeling among the public who were facing that event. However, studies concerning inspirational content in a specific unfortunate context such as the pandemic remain less attended by researchers. This article thus specifically offers a study of the categorisation of inspirational content and its effects during a specific period.

With that in mind, the present study contributes to the understanding of messages and their effects. This understanding will ultimately benefit communicators, whether they are a group of people or a company, in constructing specific key messages for a particular audience during challenging situations. The foundation of this understanding lies in delving deeper into the composition of key message components in inspirational content, particularly during unprecedented crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The key message configuration referred to here is a variation in those messages that may have the same themes but different emphases in each video. Moreover, in responding to a pandemic, incorporating societal values of a particular locality in the configuration of these central themes can be a way to get closer to the audience, and it can even be a way to build optimism and maintain a certain level of good mood.

Alongside this current context, previous studies regarding inspirational content have examined the importance of specific categories or elicitors. For example, Dale et al. (2017) studied elicitors related to the appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope and religiousness in a set of inspirational YouTube videos. Similarly, by referring to the Self-transcendent Emotion Dictionary (STED), Ji et al. (2019) measured the presence of awe, admiration, elevation, hope, gratitude and general inspiration from inspirational news content. Also, in assessing the aspects that make a film meaningful and pleasurable and the responses of the viewers, Oliver et al. (2012) employed Stern et al.'s (1998) 15-item inventory of values to come up with five categories: biospheric values (e.g., unity with nature), altruistic values (e.g., caring for the weak), conservative/traditional values (e.g., honouring parents and elders), self-enhancement/egoistic values (e.g., material possessions) and values reflecting openness to change (e.g., an exciting life). Although these three studies present three respective kinds of reactions, self-transcendent emotional reactions, news retransmission (i.e., socially shared news content) and affective and physical responses and motivation outcomes, they share similar characteristics to understand both the content and its effects. We subsequently structured our inquiry around the following two questions: (a) What are the underlying themes of the messages conveyed in inspirational videos addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic? (b) Do different configurations of inspirational themes in the selected videos result in distinct inspirational effects?

that provide inspirational effects for the public also added to building optimism in facing the pandemic. Optimism built through inspirational content contributed to individuals having the right attitude to face the pandemic and also contributed to the individual's relationship with his or her social environment. In addition, according to the aim of this study, among the selection of videos to watch are three videos that have extreme values, namely those that are dominant in optimistic actions and expressions, in the presentation of human values and empathetic messages. Future studies can use videos that have different theme configurations such as videos that have a presentation balance in action-oriented content and empathetic-oriented content or action-oriented and human values-oriented, or even a relatively balanced configuration of action-oriented, human values-oriented and empathetic-oriented content. Nevertheless, the knowledge gained from the results of our current study, and previous related studies (e.g., Jensen et al., 2022; Tkáčová et al., 2021), has provided initial knowledge for communicating with the public to build optimism and take action in difficult times.

Implications of Research

One of the implications of this study is that commercial, as well as non-commercial, organisations may consider utilising the key themes above to convey messages to the public during challenging times. Even though this study was carried out in the context of the pandemic, the common thread of finding ways to build empathetic communication can be a way of composing messages in a crisis. Moreover, incorporating what the organisation has done in response to the crisis can increase public awareness of the organisation's handling of the situation. Media, advertising and public relations agencies contracted by the organisation, when developing advertising messages, can also benefit from focusing on specific objectives to be conveyed using the key themes above to assist in delivering their aims. Similarly, defining the intended effect of inspirational messages by communicators would be beneficial for measuring the impact of those messages.

Another practical implication of this study is the use of the themes' configurations in various types of content, such as marketing materials, political messaging, persuasive messages and other social campaign messages. However, it is not intended that the key messages above should be seen as a rigid prescription; rather, the construction of optimism should be accompanied by creative treatments from the communicators.

Limitations

Aside from our empirical study participants having a relatively homogeneous social environment (i.e., all study participants were Asian students from a specific field), this study has offered an initial insight into building optimism during a pandemic, particularly from the audience's perspective. We hope that future studies on inspirational content, whether in crises or under general circumstances, will include participants from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. This will allow for a broader understanding of the topic.

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Supplemental Material

The supplemental material for this article is available online.

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