
MICROCONTENT PATTERNS AND EFFICIENCY IN YOUTUBE VLOGS: A CASE STUDY OF THE JEFFREE STAR YOUTUBE CHANNEL

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Abstract: Within the context of the digital, Computer-Mediated Discourse (CMD) of New media microcontent is of great importance as it provides the first contact and impression the user has with the content which is to follow. It needs to attract the audience to content which is not directly available and needs further steps to be taken by the user in order to access the actual information/product. For this purpose, microcontent needs to provide information about the content it pertains to (be it only textual or a combination of textual and audio-visual content). However, it has the additional function of providing the motivation which is necessary for the users/viewers to invest their time and attention in a particular video.

Being a specific type of New Media and a digitally-native discourse, the YouTube platform and its content are highly representative of the modern tendencies, such as the extremely short attention span of users, the specific ways people read online as opposed to reading paper-based documents, as well as the satisficing strategies users apply when they interact with online sources of information.

These specificities of the context in which microcontent needs to function within the YouTube platform underscore the importance of upholding the regulative principle of efficiency in formulating the textual aspect of the microcontent itself. As the author of the present article has stated in previous research, the enhanced efficiency of headlines in CMD can be discussed in relation to the consistent repetitive application of sets of design patterns, which serve as templates providing empty slots to be filled with new elements (2013, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b). In addition, the quality of microcontent can be further enhanced in terms of processing ease through the use of numerals, as they have the ability to serve as an “anchor” - “stop the wandering eye and attract fixations, even when they are embedded within a mass of words that users otherwise ignore” (Nielsen, 2007).

The theoretical propositions of the article are discussed within the context of a case study of one of the most popular English-language YouTube channels, namely the Jeffree Star Channel. This particular channel has been chosen due to the undeniable success of the microcontent it employs as indicated by the metrics on the Social Blade global analytics platform (Social Blade, 2020) - 2 174 101 159 video views and 17.5 million subscribers as of February 28th, 2020 (“Social Blade Jeffreestar User Summary”, 2020).

The article approaches the subject and the object of research by employing the following methods: web-based corpus-analytical approach; computer-mediated discourse analysis and qualitative analysis of relevant quantitative results. It does not claim to be either statistically representative or conclusive but instead aims to illustrate a specific case of successful employment of patterns for creating microcontent in terms of efficiency within the framework of YouTube.

Keywords: efficiency, microcontent, patterns, YouTube vlogs, Jeffree Star

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1. INTRODUCTION

The term “microcontent”, used initially by Nielsen (2008), is defined as “short text fragments or phrases, often presented with no additional contextual support” (Nielsen, Loranger, 2017). Furthermore, Sorrentino (2018) discusses the nature of microcontent, adding the following characteristics:

- “a written copy, imagery and/or video content that can be consumed in 10-30 seconds or less”;
- “conveys shreds of information that answer a specific question or leave an impression on the audience in a short period of time”
- “a great way to lead your audience deeper into the funnel with the short-term goal of helping them learn about your products/ services and the long-term goal of closing deals”.

Due to the specificities of user behavior in online discourse pertaining to the way people read (Redish, 2012) and communicate in general (Dobrova, Kostova, 2008, Nielsen, 2006, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, Tsvetkova, 2018, 2019). Some researchers even claim that most people share articles which they never read (DeMers, 2016) - instead, users form opinions based on summaries or just headlines. For this reason, microcontent has the potential to “make or break” content usability.

This has an important impact on the formal characteristics of microcontent itself, especially its linguistic aspects - microcontent should be “written in plain language, with no puns, and no ‘cute’ or ‘clever’ wordings” and it “must deliver good content, keep people’s interest alive, and provide value” (Nielsen, Loranger 2017 URL). Users are not likely to be willing to invest their time and attention resources by blindly clicking on a title - a link is usually followed only if users have a specific expectation regarding where it will lead them, i.e., what kind of information they will get. This is a very marked difference with the printed medium where the content is usually in the direct vicinity of the paratext (title, headline) that signals it. Online users, however, are usually faced with a multitude of links, potential pathways to be selected - i.e. evaluated in terms of the desirability of the destination they signal or promise. Therefore, microcontent (such as headlines or titles marked as links) aims at being “more promising” and “transparent” (Nielsen, Loranger 2017 URL) in order to be selected. Nielsen (2017) suggests a few guidelines for different types of microcontent:

- shorter titles are easier to read and scan;
- the headline has to make sense when the rest of the content is not displayed;
- users click on headings which [...] provide concrete information;
- efficiency can be achieved by removing nonessential words in order to improve scannability, including keywords.

From the point of view of Textlinguistics, the regulative principle of efficiency is upheld when text is used “in communicating with a minimum expenditure of effort by the participants” (Beaugrande, Dressler, 2002). It “results from [the] utilization [of text] in communication with the greatest returns for the least effort, so that PROCESSING EASE is promoted” (Beaugrande, 1980).

For the purpose of achieving the aforementioned efficiency, therefore, content creators often employ patterns in formulating their microcontent. These patterns include specific sets of particular lexical elements in a particular configuration (the basis of the pattern), as well as empty “slots” which can be filled with different elements in order to create new representatives of the pattern structure (Alexieva, 2010). Upon recognizing the structure of a familiar pattern, users can reactivate the experience and knowledge they have acquired regarding the relationships among the constant elements of the pattern basis and process the specific representative of the pattern analogically, thus lowering processing effort and enhancing efficiency.

In the context of the current paper, therefore, the consistent use of patterns in microcontent is expected to support the level of efficiency of video titles. It is also expected that there will be a certain amount of variation within the patterns themselves as a form of compensatory mechanism (a trade-off between efficiency and effectiveness) to avoid low interest and confusion on the part of users. Lastly, the brevity and clarity of titles is expected to further enhance efficiency by compacting the surface structure by means of the use of numerals.

2. CASE STUDY

The case study focuses on the Jeffrey Star YouTube channel and the content uploaded to that channel up to November, 2019. The analysis is based on previously collected excerpts from the channel content in the form of a list (Stoycheva, 2019) of all 353 items of microcontent published until November, 2019.

The preliminary analysis and categorization of the items of text-based microcontent (i.e. the video titles) yields the following groupings of microcontent:

- the category of video titles having to do with reviewing, testing and evaluating the quality of products - within this category fall the largest number of titles, 159; the productive patterns for creating microcontent here are several:
 - “[**BRAND/CREATOR/PRODUCT**] **REVIEW/REVEAL (AND SWATCHES)!**” - 61 instances;
 - “[**BRAND + PRODUCT**] ... **IS IT JEFFREE STAR APPROVED???**” - 26 instances;
 - “[**FULL FACE OF/USING ...**]” - 19 instances;
 - “[**PRICE+BRAND+PRODUCT**] **VS. [PRICE+BRAND+PRODUCT]**” - 12 instances;
 - “[**[MONTH] HOLY GRAILS ... AND FAILS [YEAR]**]” - 12 instances;
 - “[**... FIRST IMPRESSIONS**]” - 10 instances;
 - “[**THE TRUTH... [BRAND/PRODUCT]**]” - 9 instances;
 - “[**[BRAND/PRODUCT] ... HIT OR MISS?**]” - 6 instances;
 - “[**[BRAND/STORE] HAUL**]” - 4 instances;
- the category informally labeled by the author of the present article as “doing things” contains the second largest number of titles - 125; it is very loosely structured with too few and rarely repetitive lexical items to form a specific pattern in the sense adopted for the purposes of the current article; however, a general syntactic structure is easily recognizable and usually involves a fragment which includes some type of activity (doing things) and in some cases the person who is performing the activity or the object of the activity (“My boyfriend does my makeup ... OMG”, “We broke our \$59,000 Louis Vuitton skateboard”, “My secret surgery.”);

- the category of video titles pertaining to demonstrating the way to achieve a specific look or prepare for a specific occasion, commonly known as “makeup tutorial” videos - containing **51** instances of microcontent, all of which consistently follow the pattern “[**TYPE OF LOOK/OCCASION**] **MAKEUP TUTORIAL**”;
- and lastly, the category with the smallest number of videos - 18 - which contains content not native to You Tube, i.e. videos whose original intended audiences are not necessarily the subscribers and viewers of the You Tube channel; here are included music videos and ads created or for Jeffree Star and his cosmetics brand.

In order to illustrate the findings of the study and due the necessity for brevity, the present article will offer brief analysis in terms of the ways of achieving and enhancing efficiency of the 3 most productive and consistently employed patterns. These include the first two patterns in terms of popularity from the category with most videos (i.e., the “reviewing, testing and evaluating the quality of products” category) -

“[**BRAND/CREATOR/PRODUCT**] **REVIEW/REVEAL (AND SWATCHES)!**” with **61** instances and “[**BRAND + PRODUCT**] ... **IS IT JEFFREE STAR APPROVED???**” with **26** instances. The third pattern is the one which is applied with most consistency - the “[**TYPE OF LOOK/OCCASION**] **MAKEUP TUTORIAL**” pattern, with **51** instances.

Efficiency appears to be enhanced in two general ways - by means of the consistent application of a specific pattern (here referred to as “the consistency principle”) and by means of the clarity and brevity of surface structure (here, “the clarity and compactness principle”). The consistency principle is related to the structure of the pattern itself, whereas the clarity and brevity idea is related to the ways the language (in this case, English) can compact surface structure and thus require fewer resources in terms of time and effort on the part of the user in order to take in the formal, material side of the microcontent.

1. “[**BRAND/CREATOR/PRODUCT**] **REVIEW/REVEAL (AND SWATCHES)!**”

Examples include: “URBAN DECAY 'VICE' LIQUID LIPSTICKS: Review & Swatches”

“MOSCHINO + SEPHORA COLLECTION: Review & Swatches”

“KYLIE COSMETICS: THE VACATION COLLECTION: Review & Swatches”

Efficiency and the “consistency principle”:

- Empty slots (variables): the positions before “Review & Swatches” represent the slots which can be filled with different words for creating each new title;
- Core pattern elements (constant) - “Review & Swatches” - since they remain constant, the user only needs to expend resources for processing the “new”, variable elements. Thus all titles of this type are perceived as a series, a specific grouping of similar items - which improves recognition and efficiency;

Efficiency and the “clarity and compactness principle”: the use of “&” instead of “and” adds brevity (compacts surface structure); the use of capital letters improves clarity by adding emphasis on the new/important information contained in the variable elements.

2. “[**BRAND + PRODUCT**] ... **IS IT JEFFREE STAR APPROVED???**”

Examples include: “MAYBELLINE 24HR SUPERSTAY FOUNDATION... Is It Jeffree Star Approved?”

“Kit Kat Eyeshadow Palette... Is It Jeffree Star Approved?”

“Pizza Eyeshadow Palette... Is It Jeffree Star Approved?”

Efficiency and the “consistency principle”:

- Empty slots (variables): the positions before “Is It Jeffree Star Approved” represent the slots which can be filled with different words for creating each new title;
- Core pattern elements (constant) - “Is It Jeffree Star Approved” - since they remain constant, the user only needs to expend resources for processing the “new”, variable elements. Thus all titles of this type are perceived as a series, a specific grouping of similar items - which improves recognition and efficiency;

Efficiency and the “clarity and compactness principle”: the use of numerals in digital instead of lexical format (“24” instead of “twenty-four”), and the abbreviation “HR” instead of “hour” serve to compact the surface structure, while capital letters add emphasis and focus in a clear way.

3. “[**TYPE OF LOOK/OCCASION**] **MAKEUP TUTORIAL**”

Examples include: “NEON LINER w. NO FALSE LASHES Makeup Tutorial | Jeffree Star”

“DAVID BOWIE “ZIGGY STARDUST” Makeup Tutorial”

“VALENTINE'S DAY SOFT GLAM Makeup Tutorial”

Efficiency and the “consistency principle”:

- Empty slots (variables): the positions before “makeup tutorial” represent the slots which can be filled with different words for creating each new title;
- Core pattern elements (constant) - “makeup tutorial” and “| Jeffree Star” - since they remain constant, the user only needs to expend resources for processing the “new”, variable elements. Thus all titles of this type are perceived as a series, a specific grouping of similar items - which improves recognition and processing ease;

Efficiency and the “clarity and compactness principle”: the use of “w.” instead of “with”, or “w. NO” instead of “WITHOUT” achieves a combination of brevity and clarity by emphasizing on new/important information in the variable elements without wasting precious space on the screen.

3. CONCLUSION

The article concentrates on the ways of achieving the regulative principle of efficiency in the Computer-mediated discourse of YouTube microcontent, namely the titles of videos from the Jeffree Star You Tube channel. The efficiency of microcontent is found to be enhanced by the creating of a sense of familiarity which encourages the users to process the familiar information more quickly and easily. Furthermore, this allows users to focus their attention on the new information and through the organization of the information in keywords and the use of numerals as anchors during reading to employ the main online reading strategies of skimming and scanning in an easier, more effortless and efficient way.

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