

YOUTUBE VIDEO TITLES AS AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE FOR VIDEO CONTENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE GOOD MYTHICAL MORNING YOUTUBE CHANNEL

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Abstract: The present article offers to take a look at the specific role of video titles and their unique organizational and structuring function within the unique multimodal universe of the YouTube video sharing platform. For the purpose of examining and illustrating this, the Good Mythical Morning (n.d.a) YouTube channel will serve as a testing field. This particular channel has been chosen, first of all, due to its remarkable success and popularity - it boasts 17.2 million subscribers and 7,524,143,682 views as of November, 2021 according to Social Blade (2021, November 25) - resulting from the continual efforts and savvy of entire team of professional content creators and producers. An additional factor which singles out this channel as especially appropriate for the intended research is the abundant material for observation and analysis it provides with its 2778 videos spread over 19 seasons since 2012.

The interface of the YouTube platform provides channels with the opportunity to organize content in various ways by creating so called “Playlists” - lists of videos grouped by a certain principle. This can be done on the basis of chronological ordering (as in the case of grouping together all videos uploaded during a particular “season”, or year - the Good Mythical Morning channel has a list of 19 such seasons, 2 per each year of the existence of the channel). Another way of organizing the content is in terms of “Created playlists” which feature groupings of similar videos, or, videos of the same type or genre of video content (as of November, 2021, there are over 50 such playlists - see Good Mythical Morning, n.d.b). For the creation of these groupings, video titles play a major role - they serve as labels for each video and help the users form expectations regarding the content they are about to view. Moreover, since viewers on YouTube are by default presented with a playlist of suggested videos generated by the YouTube algorithm, the chances of viewers staying on the channel and continuing to watch similar content to the one they have been detected to like and gravitate towards is increased. Instead of moving on to a different type or genre of video, the person can simply “stay” within the playlist, thus generating more views and improving engagement. In order for these similar videos to be recognized as a variation on a theme instead of something entirely different their titles need to also be recognizably similar and pertaining to a common genre or type - this is achieved by generating titles by employing particular patterns for creating microcontent. What will be of interest for the present study is the specific types of patterns employed by the Good Mythical Morning channel in generating their video titles and how they serve as the basis for organizing content within the framework of a multimodal media platform.

Keywords: YouTube video titles, Good Mythical Morning, microcontent patterns

1. INTRODUCTION

Titles online play a crucial role in ensuring the visibility of digital content. Their so-called “clickbaitiness” ensures that the particular piece of content will not get lost in an ocean of results competing for the limited time- and attention- resources of online users. As content creators are well aware of the effect a title can have on their product, the fact that the choice of a title can “make or break” it, their efforts are divided among the creation of the content on the one hand and, on the other hand, the just as important presentation or “business card” it gets on various platforms. Thus, when accessed via a search engine, content is ranked based on the search engine’s algorithm and this results in its particular placement on the results page(s). Considering the fact that searches usually return thousands or even millions of hits, the importance of choosing words that the algorithm promotes would seem obvious. When accessed via a different platform, however, different algorithm ranks that same content and, whether we like it or not from the point of view of transparency, not all media platforms are open and clear about the criteria underlying their algorithms. Facebook, for example, famously (or, rather, notoriously) refuses to make public their algorithm. And even though YouTube which, according to the business data portal Statista (2021) is the second most popular social network worldwide as of 2021 (see fig. 1 below), has given free access to the guidelines governing their algorithm, the specifics of each and every successive update or “tweak” are never available, not even for content creators who are the main source of revenue for the website. Thus, to their often publicly expressed lament, even established content creators with millions of subscribers and entire teams of producers and marketing experts at the ready have to resort to A-B testing and guessing whether their title meets the current requirements not only of the potential viewers, but also (and, perhaps, first of all) those of the algorithm so that it pushes their video higher up on the list of recommendations (Eves, 2021). This process of trial and error yields results in the form of established

and proven successful combinations of title pattern and thumbnail format using a variation of which will lead to almost guaranteed success. Although the role of the thumbnail is undeniably crucial in getting people to click on a video, the present paper will focus on the role of the textual component of the multimodal YouTube video - i.e., the title.

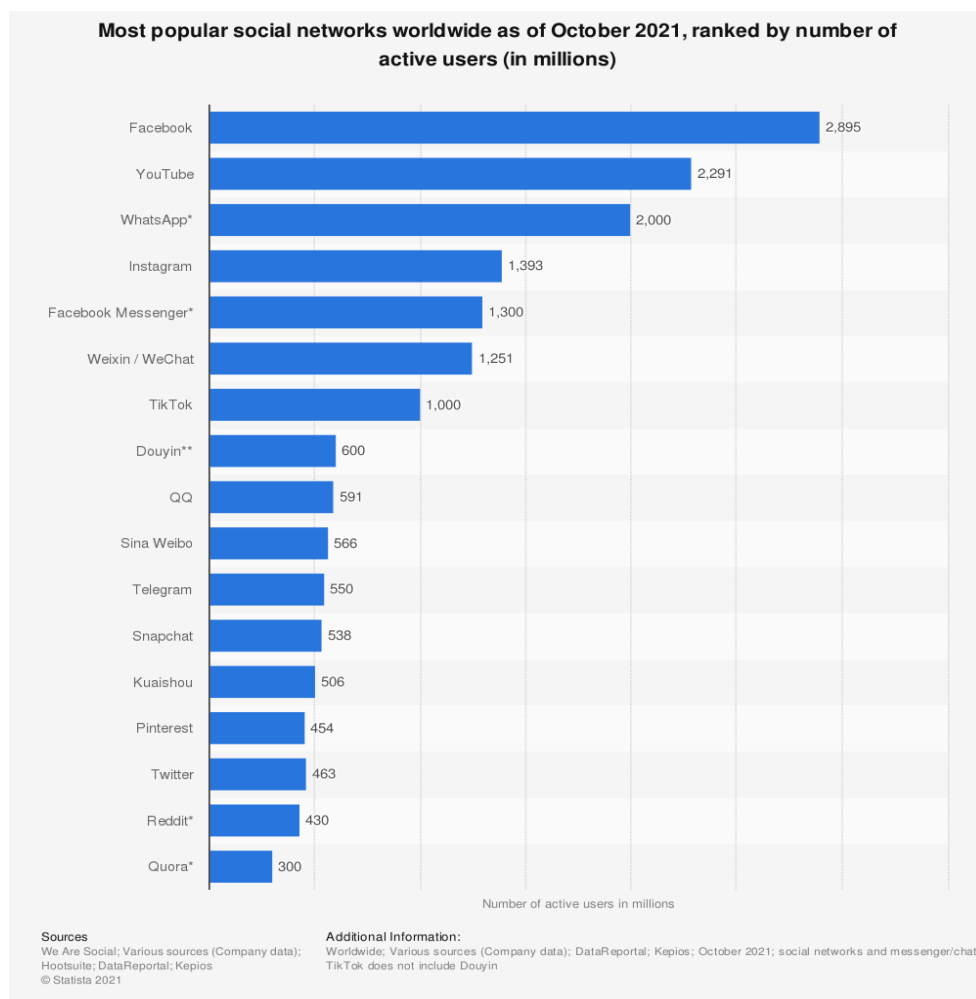


Fig. 1

According to its own statistical data, the YouTube video-sharing website is currently accessible in over 100 countries and across 80 different languages with over two billion users, and over 500 hours of content being uploaded every minute (YouTube, 2021). The amount of traffic this immense content volume creates is the basis for the financial success and stardom of the so-called YouTube celebrities or influencers, but the pressure of producing competitive content is also in direct proportion to the abundance of available options. In order to look for successful practices and valuable experience, the present study observes the Good Mythical Morning YouTube channel. The creators of the channel - Rhett James McLaughlin and Charles Lincoln Neal III, also known as Rhett and Link - joined YouTube back in 2008, but the inaugural episode of their popular comedic talk-show GMM was uploaded on January 9th, 2012. Their enterprise has since gained enormous success and has resulted in the creation of the Mythical Entertainment Company, placing them at the 4th place in the top 10 highest-paid YouTubers of 2020 according to Forbes magazine (Berg & Brown, 2020) with earnings of \$ 20 million across the channels owned by Mythical Entertainment.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Existing classifications of online titles (also known as microcontent) take into consideration different sets of criteria. These classifications include for example the one proposed by Morrow (2012) with its range of threat-, “zen”-,

“piggyback”-, mistake-, “how-to”- and list headlines; as well as the one compiled by Bly (2005) comprising 8 headline kinds (“direct”-, “indirect”-, “news”-, “how-to”-, “question”-, “command”-, “reason-why”- and “testimonial” headlines. More recently, a 2013 study by Conductor (Safran, 2013) isolates “the five general ways in which headlines are written”, including “Normal”-, question-, “How to”-, number-containing and reader-addressing structure (ibid.). In order of user preference, the headline types rate as follows: the “number” structure is the most popular among successful headlines (36 %), followed by the reader-addressing structure (21 %), the “How to” structure (17 %), the “normal” structure (15 %) and lastly, the question with 11 %.

selecting and using strong and relevant keywords by placing them at the beginning of the title and thus creating a front-loaded title; using title case (capitalizing every content word in the title) or uppercase (using all caps throughout the title); including lists and numbers in the form of digits; limiting the number of characters to under 60 (in some sources, 66 or 70) characters including the spaces; using “How to” in the title (Baird, Sehl, 2020; Becker, 2019; Bedrina, 2020; Lockwood, 2018; Velumani, 2020).

However, titles within the computer-mediated electronic discourse of the YouTube platform do not occur on their own, or even alongside predominantly linguistic content as is typically the case in the printed medium or the digital medium of search engine result pages, online newspapers, magazines and web pages (Snickars & Vonderau, 2009, Benson, 2017, Burgess & Green, 2018). Instead, they are always accompanied by (or, rather, considering the priority of the audio-visual medium on this website, accompanying) the videos themselves and the so-called “thumbnails”, or, images which serve various functions ranging from signaling what the video will be about to enticing viewers to click by being purposefully ambiguous or problematic. In this sense, YouTube video titles comprise “microcontent” - defined as “short text fragments or phrases” (Nielsen & Loranger, 2017) - or, digital paratext - defined as “all the ancillary elements that accompany a text, from the title to the notes” (Pellizzi, 2006, 5) and form a specific part of the multimodal universe of YouTube discourse.

3. RESULTS

Figure 2 below is an illustration of the interface of the playlist page of the Good Mythical Morning channel:

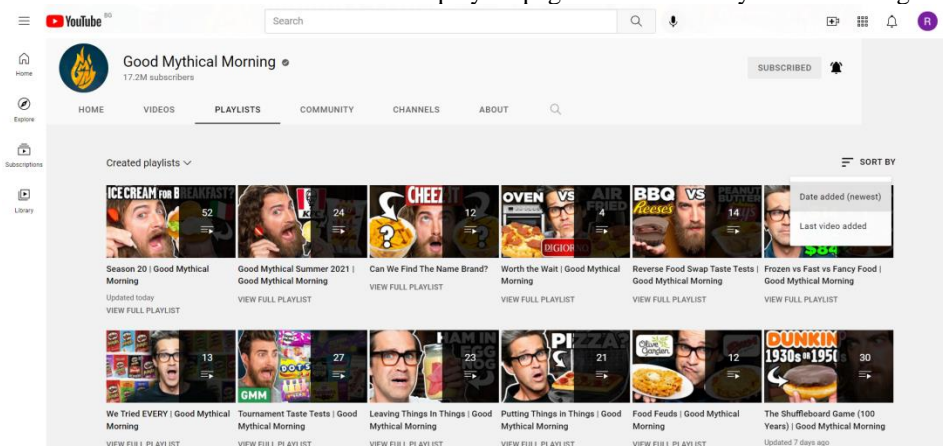


Fig. 2

The channel in fact has a set of 193 created playlists, of which 20 are dedicated to grouping together all 20 of the existing seasons, 4 to the Good Mythical Summer episodes, 1 to the “show about the show” - LTAT (“Let’s Talk About That”), 1 to a documentary about Rhett and Link’s hometown, 3 playlists contain a standalone comedic series called “Rhett and Link’s Buddy System”, 1 contains the so-called “Mythical Show” production (a scripted comedic series which contains various sketches and skits), 1 lists the show “Good Morning Chia Lincoln” - the actual prototype of the Good Mythical Morning Show, there are playlists of various “Best of” podcasts (such as “Craziest Experiments” and “Best Mythical Moments”) and a separate one for the songs created by the comedic duo.

Table 1 below is a brief representation of those of the playlists which have been organized by using the title pattern and the interesting aspect is the fact that this organization into sets of videos has been done by the channel itself, i.e. it does not involve the personal influence of the researcher towards the content and their specific understanding of what typology is to be applied. Thus, it is the authors/producers of the content and the channel creators themselves (albeit via their team members or, as they refer to it, the “Mythical Crew”) who view titles as an organizing principle and method of bringing order into the somewhat chaotic multimodal discourse of a YouTube channel with abundant content.

#	Playlist title	Title examples
1.	Taste Tests! Good Mythical Morning	“What's The Best Way To Reheat Leftovers?”; “Trader Joe's Fall Snacks Taste Test”; “Is There Anything Better Than Pasta Sauce On Spaghetti? (Taste Test)”
2.	Will It? Good Mythical Morning	“Will It Gummy? Taste Test”
3.	International Taste Tests Good Mythical Morning	“International Burger King Taste Test”
4.	The Shuffleboard Game (100 Years) Good Mythical Morning	“100 Years of Donuts Taste Test”; “100 Years Of Exercise (GAME)”;
5.	Tournament Taste Tests Good Mythical Morning	“Worst Halloween Candy Taste Test (Day 1)”;
6.	Leaving Things in Things Good Mythical Morning	“Leaving Weird Things In Eggnog For A Month (Experiment)”
7.	Putting Things In Things Good Mythical Morning	“Putting Weird Things In A Waffle Maker (Test)”;
8.	Mystery Countdown Theater Good Mythical Morning	“What Crazy Cake Is This? (Game)”;
9.	Reverse Food Swap Taste Tests Good Mythical Morning	“BBQ Peanut Butter Food vs. Peanut Butter BBQ Food Taste Test”
10.	Alternate Universe Snacks Good Mythical Morning	“Alternate Universe Snacks Taste Test”
11.	We Tried EVERY Good Mythical Morning	“We Tried EVERY Pringles Flavor”
12.	Discontinued Snacks Good Mythical Morning	“Discontinued Snacks Taste Test”
13.	Food Feuds Good Mythical Morning	“Olive Garden vs. Buca di Beppo Taste Test FOOD FEUDS”
14.	Can We Find The Name Brand?	“Can We Find The Name Brand?”
15.	Fancy Fast Food Good Mythical Morning	“\$500 Subway Footlong Taste Test”; “\$120 McGriddle Taste Test FANCY FAST FOOD”
16.	Frozen vs Fast vs Fancy Food Good Mythical Morning	“Frozen vs Fast vs Fancy Food Taste Test”
17.	Worth The Wait Good Mythical Morning	“Oven vs. Air Fryer Taste Test”

Table 1

4. DISCUSSION

Of the entire 193 created playlists, there are actually 17 whose organization can be considered to be based on the specific genre or type of video and the pattern of the video title itself. It is exactly these 17 playlists which are of interest for the present discussion since the rest of the playlists are based on chronology (season number) or are containers for a separate, more or less standalone sub-show(s) instead of sets of videos which form part of the everyday experience viewers receive from the show. In fact, all these 17 playlists are based on the type or genre of video and the separate videos they contain are actually part of the other, less discriminating playlists (taste tests and games are part of the seasons).

The largest video count belongs to the playlist entitled “Taste Tests!” - as of November 2021 there are 558 videos in this playlist. It is followed by the “Will It?” playlist (94 videos), “International Taste Test” (39 videos), “The Shuffleboard Game (100 Years)” (30 videos) and the “Tournament Taste Tests” (27 videos). Less populated playlists include “Leaving Things in Things” (23 videos), “Putting Things In Things” (21 videos), “Mystery Countdown Theater” (15 videos), “Reverse Food Swap Taste Tests” (14 videos), “Alternate Universe Snacks” (14 videos), “We Tried EVERY” (13 videos), “Discontinued Snacks” (13 videos), “Food Feuds” (12 videos), “Can we Find The Name Brand?” (12 videos), “Fancy Fast Food” (11 videos), “Frozen vs Fast vs Fancy Food” (9 videos), “Worth the Wait” (4 videos).

The redundancy in compiling the playlists is obvious - videos from the playlist with the largest number are actually further organized into sub-categories or sub-types of videos, which then become the basis for more playlists. This is due to the fact that the organizing principle in compiling the “Taste Tests!” playlist is, in fact, the genre or type of

the video and not the specific title pattern. Supposedly in order to create variety in the content of the channel, one and the same genre of video can be entitled using different title patterns whose popularity and usage frequency is guided by the number of views, likes and comments they generate. As a result, this same video genre playlist contains representations of all the patterns for generating titles which in turn will serve as organizing principle for the compiling of the other playlists - which, of course, contain fewer videos, due to the applied filter of matching a specific title pattern. The same principle of grouping videos together based on their type or genre and not on the basis of the specific title pattern is applied to the "Mystery Countdown Theatre" playlist, the "Reverse Food Swap Taste Tests" playlist, the "Food Feuds" playlist, the "Fancy Fast Food" playlist and the "Worth The Wait" playlist. In all of these playlists titles are created by using various patterns and none of the patterns serves as an actual organizing principle.

On the contrary, the playlists entitled "Will It?", "International Taste Tests", "Leaving Things In Things", "Putting Things In Things", "Alternate Universe Snacks", "We Tried EVERY", "Discontinued Snacks" and "Can We Guess The Name Brand?" are all compiled on the basis of the title patterns employed in the videos where either all titles in the playlist are exactly the same and the only discernment between separate videos is made by using different thumbnails, or, alternatively, by employing the same pattern and filling the empty slots in it with different objects, thus creating variation on the same pattern. The first place in number of applications is the "Will It?" pattern which is one of the popular title types or patterns. The basis of the structure of these titles ("Will It") has been taken and used as the name of the entire playlist, with all titles within that playlist employing variations of the pattern by adding different elements to the empty slots after "Will It" and the question mark - such as "Will It Gummy? Taste Test". The resulting titles are grammatically incorrect in the traditional sense, as the empty slots are not filled with the infinitive form of a verb but instead with a noun phrase (or in one case with an adjective - "Will It Double Awesome? (EXPERIMENT)"). This adds to the effectiveness of the titles since they sound unusual and unexpected. Within the videos themselves, this specific video type is introduced with the catchphrase: "Today we ask the age-old question: will it X", where X is the specific product or object that was used to fill the slot.

The next most populated playlist is a variation on the "Taste Test" genre, created by adding the word "International". Thus the pattern for the titles becomes "International X Taste Test", where X is the slot where different object or product names can be inserted to create new titles, such as "International Burger King Taste Test". The use of this pattern is very consistent across 38 of the 39 titles, with only one exception - the word "GAME" is added in one instance.

Similarly to the "Taste Tests!" playlist, the playlist "The Shuffleboard Game (100 Years)" with its 30 videos classifies videos in terms of genre or the actual activity that takes place in the videos instead of the actual title pattern applied. Thus the phrase "The Shuffleboard Game" is not part of any of the titles within this playlist, instead including "100 Years Of X (GAME)". X is the empty slot to be filled with various activities or objects (donuts, exercise, etc.) The playlist is generally consistent in the application of this pattern, although there are 3 instances of using a Wh- question pattern with the question word "When" - as in "When Were These Fried Foods Invented?"

Another type of "Taste Test" videos include the "Tournament Taste Tests" which comprise mini-series of taste tests over several days and a "finals" episode. Each of the episodes within the specific "tournament" is entitled in the same way (following the same pattern) except for the addition of "Day 1", "Day 2" etc. and "Finals" after the title. This playlist, however, contains considerable variation in terms of title patterns - only one mini-series of 5 episodes (separate videos) actually contains the phrase "Tournament Taste Test" and it is not in this order but instead is phrased as "X Taste Test Tournament" ("Ice Cream Taste Test Tournament: Chocolate Flavors", "Ice Cream Taste Test Tournament (Day 2)"). The rest of the titles are based on the patterns "Best X Taste Test", "Worst X Taste Test", "Who Has The Best X (Taste Test)", "Who Has The Worst X (Taste Test)" and "What's The Best X (Taste Test)", where X is the empty slot to be filled with the specific product to be tested.

An interesting phenomenon in classification and organization into playlists can be observed in the playlists "Mystery Countdown Theater", "We Tried EVERY", "Worth The Wait" and "Frozen vs. Fast vs. Fancy Food". All of these playlists, regardless of whether they were compiled based on genre or title pattern, are in fact a separate mini series of games which have different so called "editions". The games have specific names and these names do not feature in the titles of the videos themselves but are instead either used as the title of the playlist (as in the case of the "Mystery Countdown Theater" and "Worth The Wait" playlists) or are only included in the video episode script where Rhett and Link introduce the game and specify the "edition" which corresponds to the type of product being tested. The latter is the case with the "We Tried EVERY" and the "Frozen vs. Fast vs. Fancy Food" playlists, which correspond to the "GUT CHECK: X edition" (for example, "Gut Check: Pringles Edition" from the "We Tried EVERY" playlist) and the "Naked Food\$ (X edition)" (for example, "Naked Food\$: Naked Barbeque Edition. Naked." from the "Frozen vs. Fast vs. Fancy Food" playlist) games respectively.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As can be seen from the repetitive and consistent use of several patterns for creating titles and the variations created by filling the “slots” within these basic patterns with different elements, titles are a popular organizing principle for the content and playlists within the GMM YouTube channel. They are a reliable source of information about the type of content in the video and are an important source of expectations alongside the visual component of the thumbnail. The combination of the thumbnail and the title thus form a specific unit where the separate components complete each other and result in the unique multimodal discourse of the YouTube video. The relative weight of each of the components - the title and the thumbnail, respectively - varies in terms of the information it carries as well as in terms of the effect it has on the potential viewer and their willingness to click on the specific video. In this sense, neither of the components is to be underestimated or disregarded. This exact attention to detail and the thought that goes into creating and selecting the appropriate title and thumbnail combination is what makes successful channels stand out among the abundant competing content sources.

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