Elements to Social Media Success: Analyzing Fashion Trends and Performance Factors on Instagram

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Abstract

Trends are the catapult to success for accounts on social media. And though many creators and businesses follow similar trends, only a select number reach their desired results. Previous research has only gone as far as explaining the significance of social media in the fashion industry, as well as the power of trends in the digital realm. This study evaluates 10 Instagram posts under the #sweatervest trend, categorizing them into successful and unsuccessful based on engagement metrics to assess which factors—relevance, interactiveness, use of familiar concepts, innovation, and entertainment—most contribute to performance. Findings conclude a generally positive relationship between each factor and the performance of the content. These elements together serve as a "formula" or "recipe" on how to make successful content when following a social media trend.

Keywords: Social media, social media trends, consumer behavior, social media algorithm, marketing, digital marketing, fashion

1. Introduction

Social media has significantly transformed modern marketing, offering advantages such as lower costs and broader market reach. Indeed, it has become a relevant and almost necessary channel for many businesses. Social media are interactive technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression through virtual platforms [1].

Information sharing occurs through user-generated content, such as pictures, videos, posts, and various other media [2]. A key aspect of social media is trends. Trends manifest as a post, topic, or idea on social media that is popularized and enthusiastically followed for some time. If utilized effectively, trends can bring an account of widespread popularity and growth, regardless of its initial following. However, navigating through trends is challenging for many, as it is difficult to discern what factors contribute to the success of some trends and the failure of others, despite their similarity in application.

The purpose of this study is to identify the specific factors that contribute to the success of content under social media trends. The factors evaluated in this study are relevance, interactiveness, utilization of familiar concepts and innovation, and entertainment. The study will first classify content associated with a specific fashion trend into either a "successful" or "unsuccessful" category based on its performance compared to other content under the same hashtag. Then, each post will be analyzed and examined for its implementation of the identified factors, and their similarities and disparities will be identified. This

analysis investigates why certain posts perform more successfully than others, even if they follow the same trend.

These factors essentially create a "formula" for understanding the multiple aspects influencing the success of a post. Further exploration of these factors will be done to understand how they could influence content performance. However, it is imperative to acknowledge the limitations of this study, as it exclusively focuses on one fashion trend, one industry, and one social media platform, as well as only a select number of factors. As a result of the study's narrow focus, the results may not necessarily be applicable in other fields and/or a broader context. Nevertheless, the insights obtained from analyzing trending content and their factors offer valuable guidance for readers seeking to both follow and create successful trends/content on social media.

2. Literature Review

Social media has created a significant impact on the marketing of any industry, especially in fashion, which is widely relevant in modern society. Within daily living, fashion is an influence in various ways. According to Ash and Wilson, fashion is an "everyday cultural manifestation". Fashion is something that is seen every day—thus an integral part of living [3]. Buckley and Clark consider fashion to be embedded in the practices of people's daily lives, becoming both a personal expression of everyday life and a sociocultural phenomenon [4]. Additionally, Kim argues that the contradictions and nuances of living are reflected in fashion [5].

As a result, the feature of fashion online allows the industry to have a greater scope. Its impact is widespread, as going digital allows for the discussion of and involvement with fashion to become broadly accessible. Rocamora mentions the significance of the tool, through the example of blogging, to both the production and retail industries. More specifically, it is argued that the blogging community has been able to contribute to "the production and the circulation of fashion discourse" [6], as such spaces are available to many—fostering communication. Additionally, recent studies have found that with the help of influencers, high-efficiency, and novel digital technology social media further contributes to the dissemination of fashion in individual lives [7]. It is crucial for businesses in fashion to pay close attention to social media and the online realm, as it has such a great influence on the industry.

Furthermore, the significance of trends in social media is evident to businesses and creators alike, and even the general public. Asur et al. believe that amongst the chaotic nature of social media and the diverse collection of interactions, certain topics always manage to attract an inordinate amount of attention, becoming the most popular subjects [8]. They argue that the visibility of such well-known topics contributes to the community's overall awareness of what is trending and affects their public agenda [8]. As a result, social media trends are able to offer crucial market insight for businesses, detailing what the general public finds valuable online and, in real life.

With this, it is also useful to understand what factors lead to trends becoming popularized. Contrary to popular belief, Asur et al. argue that factors such as user activity and number of followers do not contribute significantly to trend creation [9]. In fact, it is proposed that the resonance of content with those viewing play a major role in trend development [10]. This point will be discussed further in the "Relevance" section of "Key Factors of a Viral Social Media Post". Furthermore, the novelty of a trend also contributes heavily to its life cycle and progression [11]. There are many factors that contribute to the momentum of trends on social media, and understanding the dynamics of each element is beneficial for businesses.

The relevance of fashion and trends in modern society is evident, and why further research is important

on the ever-evolving subject. Fashion impacts many individuals through their unique properties and authentic value, and this influence is further expanded through social media. In this digital realm, trends offer insight to creators and businesses, giving perspective to what consumers find valuable online. In conclusion, social media trends and their marketing benefits towards a business is evident. However, there is a lack of information on how businesses can leverage such a concept, and use it to their advantage—which this study aims to focus on.

3. Key Factors of a Viral Social Media Post

The question of what makes certain content successful can be determined by various elements. This study will analyze how each content incorporates the following factors/elements into content: relevance, interactiveness, innovation, familiar concepts, and entertainment. Each of the factors has been determined to play an important role in the performance of content on social media, and is explained for their significance:

1. Relevance:

Trends generally gain popularity because of their relevance to other important subjects during the time. These subjects can be relevant through time: relating to current events, news, or through context: resonating with the viewer's values and interests [12]. Furthermore, Asur et al. argue that content resonating strongly with audiences rises in popularity and spreads quickly [8], demonstrating society and the algorithm's value of relevant information. Additionally, the unpredictable life cycle of trends further creates a drive for timely content, as trends can rise, peak, and die down within a short period of time. By ensuring content is posted in a timely and contextual manner, popularity can be captured and maintained online.

2. Interactiveness:

Many social media algorithms favor content with high engagement [12] [13], as it signals that viewers find the content valuable. Thus, creating content that encourages interaction is vital; interactive content encourages a two-way interaction between the creator and the viewer, rather than passive consumption. Fostering such an environment online is dependent on many factors. For example, asking questions to viewers, offering valuable information, and call-to-actions are all methods to encourage viewers to interact with the creator's post. Creating meaningful exchanges, and maintaining a rich community are both able to positively contribute to the performance metrics of a post.

3. Utilization of Familiar Concepts:

Fashion trends are usually based around a subject with which the audience is already familiar, as seen with the concept of cyclical fashion [14]. Additionally, similar to the mere-exposure-effect, incorporating familiar aspects into social media trends allow for greater interest from the audience. The usage of broadly recognized ideas can build momentum for a subject, as people quickly understand the references, and are moved to spread information to others. On the contrary, ideas that aren't familiar to viewers create confusion and can result in disengagement. Following and utilizing familiar concepts can facilitate viewer processing, and their willingness to participate, and share the idea.

4. Innovation:

Although the feature of familiar concepts is crucial, adding elements of creativity to differentiate content can further improve its performance. Innovative content provides a new perspective or format that captures attention, leading to sparked interest and motive to engage. Furthermore, with fashion trends continuously influenced by various factors [15], innovation is necessary to prevent stagnation and adhere to the dynamic

realm of fashion (and trends). Though, it is imperative to discern the optimal amount of innovation and familiarity in trends; too much novelty can lead to creating an entirely new trend/subject, while not incorporating enough creativity can lead to disinterest in the viewer. By utilizing novelty, new and creative ideas can contribute to trend movements.

5. Entertainment:

Incorporating entertaining elements into content can help boost its engagement, as such metrics promote content that fits human social and affective biases, even when sacrificing content quality [16]. By offering the viewer something of value to their emotions (such as humor, drama, or excitement, which can be obtained through entertainment), they are incentivized to continue watching the content and engage with it, especially through sharing. Sharing content is a result of the viewer finding the information valuable to either themselves or others [17], which can be facilitated through emotional connection. Entertainment captures attention, creates and maintains psychological value, and drives the desire to converse and share experiences with others, which in turn allows the post to flourish through the platform.

By understanding how each factor contributes to the success of content under a specific trend on social media, businesses can better position their content to follow trends and, as a result, optimize their outcomes. The analysis of these factors and their influence offers perspective on how to navigate through complex, constantly changing trends on social media. As businesses incorporate these insights into their marketing strategies, they can expect an improvement in their social media and content performance when following trends, whether in terms of likes, interactions, growth, and various other metrics.

4. Methodology

The data in this research was collected primarily through Instagram, due to its focus on visual media, as fashion is a visual topic. Furthermore, it will also facilitate finding and collecting data, which will be done manually. To collect appropriate content on the platform, Instagram's search feature was utilized; 10 posts mentioning the sweater vest trend in the last 4 years were selected via hashtags. After evaluating based on engagement metrics, posts were categorized as successful or unsuccessful. These posts were then analyzed for their utilization of a chosen factor and how their counterparts were compared in the application.

This research paper utilizes a mixed-methods approach to identify the specific factors contributing to the success of content under trends on social media. Both qualitative analysis and quantitative data provide insight into the topic. Posts with engagement rates 3-4 times higher than similar posts were deemed successful, while counterparts were categorized as unsuccessful. Then, each "set" of successful/unsuccessful content for each factor will be analyzed and examined for its implementation of the factors, and their similarities and disparities will be identified through further qualitative evaluation.

Qualitative data was collected through content and thematic analysis, contributing further depth to the findings. For content analysis, posts in the sample were categorized based on factors such as relevance, interactivity, use of familiar concepts/innovation, and entertainment. They were also further analyzed based on how accurately the content demonstrated a certain factor, and how it utilized the factor. In addition to content analysis, qualitative thematic analysis was also used to identify recurring themes and patterns in the posts, such as visual elements and keywords. These help create a more in-depth understanding of the qualitative analysis, identifying what other factors there were that could influence the performance of the post. Posts were further evaluated for their comment sentiments, which aided in identifying how consumers reacted to their content, positively or negatively. This combined approach allowed a better understanding of the factors influencing post-success within the sweater vest trend.

Additionally with Instagram, other platforms such as Google Search Engine and Trends were utilized to find further data. Google's Search Engine was utilized to find relevant topics in relation to the "#sweatervest" trend, such as keywords, subjects, and media. After discovering these related topics, Google Trends was utilized to confirm the relationship between certain keywords and external events, as well as time. Each of these platforms served a vital role in collecting additional needed data in the study.

5. Case Study
6a. Relevance

The timing of when content is published in relation to current news and events is crucial to its success, as relevance is a significant part of social media trends. Almost all trends are related to a specific movement, event, or season.

By analyzing the search volume spikes for "sweater vest" during autumn and colder seasons, as seen in Figures 1 and 2, it becomes evident how trends directly relate to specific temporal contexts—which in this case, is the change in seasons and the resulting fashion preferences. This spike is not coincidental, but rather a direct reflection of the changing consumer behaviors and preferences that accompany the changing seasons. This data clearly displays the symbiotic relationship between trends and timely context in content creation. Furthermore, this data also demonstrates how timing content to align with shifts in consumer interests is imperative for leveraging relevance.

Figures 1 & 2: Relevance in Google Trends Analysis on "Sweater Vest"

Google Trends results for the term "Sweater vest". This data shows that during colder seasons (mostly fall), the search for the item increases drastically compared to other seasons, and this trend is found in both years 2021 and 2022. Data source: Google Trends (https://www.google.com/trends) [18].
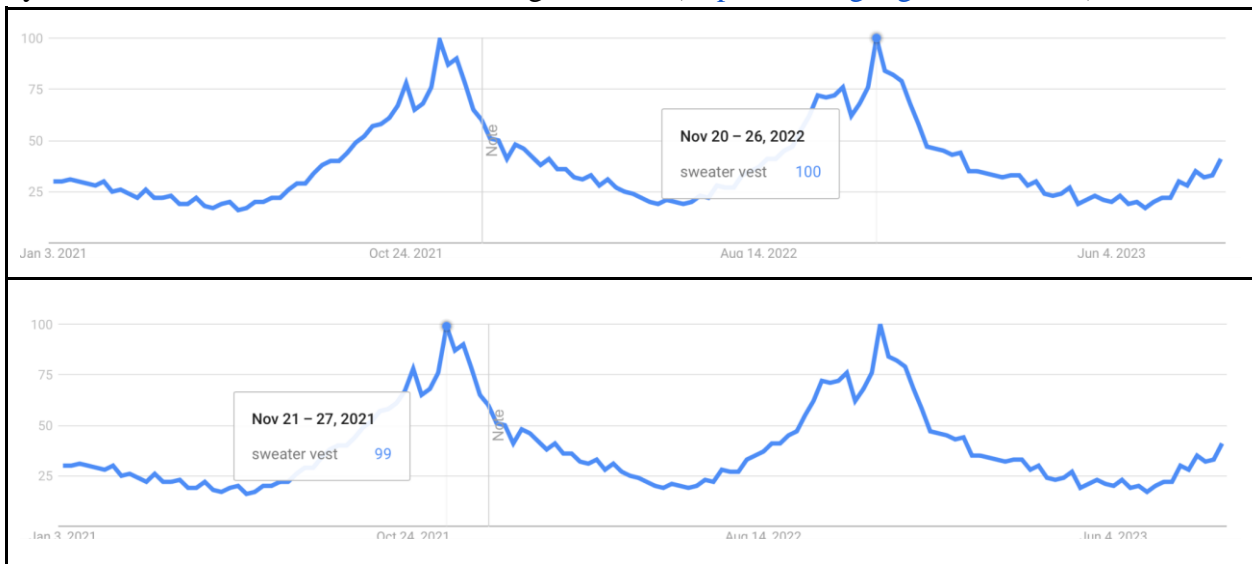
Furthermore, the images of a "successful" post (Figure 3) and an "unsuccessful" (Figure 4) also demonstrate how crucial timely relevance is in the performance of content under the same trend. The successful post was published in the fall and generated nearly 3.7k likes. On the other hand, despite being posted in the same year, the unsuccessful post generated merely a fraction of likes due to being published during a warmer season. These posts demonstrate how fashion interests and trends follow changes over time in relation to external events, such as seasons.

Figure 3: Successful Post Demonstration for Relevance Factor

This content demonstrates the usage of relevance, as it is posted during colder seasons, such as November. As a result, there is more value in the post to viewers due to its alignment with current seasons, and thus more successful. Data source: Instagram (instagram.com) [19].

Figure 4: Unsuccessful Post Demonstration for Relevance Factor

On the other hand, there is a post that demonstrates a lack of relevance. This is due to the fact that it is published during April, which is a warm season. Due to this reason, viewers are less likely to deem this content as "important", since the season needed for the sweater vest is gone. Data source: Instagram (instagram.com) [20].

6b. Engagement

The engagement of a post, whether it is through shares, comments, or more, can catalyze its growth. When a post garners likes, comments, shares, and other forms of engagement, it sends a signal to social media algorithms that the content is valuable and engaging. In response, these algorithms often reward the post by displaying it to a broader audience, thereby further enhancing its impact and creating a feedback loop. Additionally, different metrics hold different values: having more comments may be helpful in creating an involved community, while likes and shares can boost content visibility. These metrics can be encouraged in unique ways.

For example, writing a detailed description in a post can allow the audience to have more information to discuss and engage within the comment section. The example posts (Figures 5-6) depict a similar format—the creator getting dressed and showing how they would style sweater vest pieces. Through their descriptions, they demonstrate how certain atmospheres can be fostered within their comments.

The first post's (Figure 5) description has information on the clothing pieces and the model's measurements. These details are valuable for the viewer, as some may want to buy the product. The description also utilizes a call-to-action to encourage users to comment and get more information (such as "LINKS" seen in Figure 5).

In the first post, there are over a thousand comments—many regarding the products featured in the video. On the contrary, the other post examples—which detail less information (captions of 1-2 sentences at most)—have significantly fewer comments. This may be due to the fact that viewers do not get much information from the creator to discuss, and as a result, are less willing to engage due to lack of context.

By fostering an interactive atmosphere, whether through captions, comments, or in the content itself—the community can create conversation from valuable or interesting information, leading to an increase in metrics, and allowing for success within the algorithm.

Figure 5: Description of Successful Post-Demonstrating Interactivity

This caption has 130 words (excluding hashtags/keywords), detailing the creator's experience with the products in the post, her measurements, as well as a call-to-action for viewers to comment "LINKS" in order to get more information on the products. The abundance of details and the call to action both contribute to creating an interactive environment—encouraging the audience to take action. Data source: Instagram (instagram.com) [21].

Figure 6: Description of Unsuccessful Post demonstrating Un-Interactivity (2)

In this caption, there are also fewer words (29 words, excl. hashtags/keywords) than in the first example. However, there is an abundance of keywords, which has a similar nature to hashtags on social media. Although the aim of the keywords is to reach more viewers, there are only 23 comments, demonstrating that the content of the captions is necessary for creating value for the viewer. Data source: Instagram (instagram.com) [22].
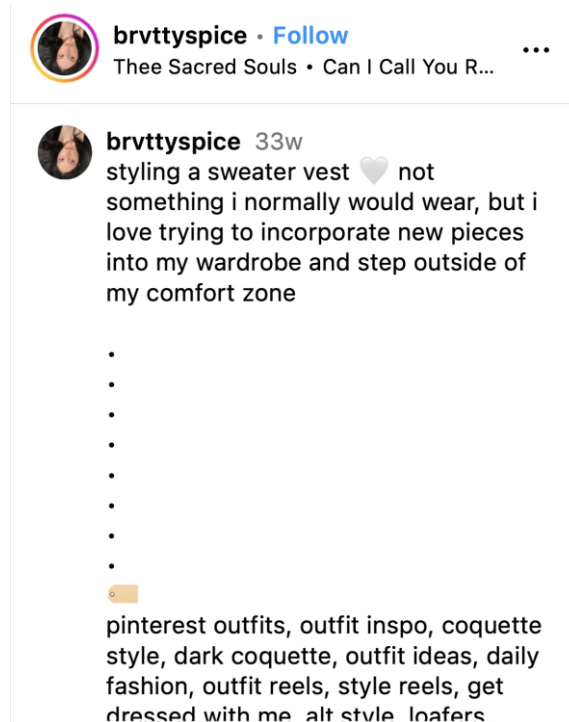
6c. Usage of Familiar Concepts

The sweater vest trend builds upon concepts and fashion styles with which many consumers are already familiar. In many outfits, the sweater vest is commonly paired with a t-shirt, turtleneck, or blouse. This pairing of the sweater vest with other well-known garments allows a larger audience to resonate with the post, as many have access to these garments. This recognition factor facilitates the trend's connection to more individuals: the concept is not an entirely new idea, but rather something they recognize. The use of familiar concepts bridges the gap between novelty and the comfort of familiarity.

This is exemplified in both Instagram posts, where the model in one post wears an undershirt with the sweater vest and the other does not. Undershirts have been commonly worn with the sweater vest since its creation—since the 1910s when retailers were starting to place knitwear among sportswear for the upper classes [23]. Hence, many are familiar with the sweater vest and undershirt pairing, compared to the vest by itself.

Although the posts were published within a relatively short time frame from each other, the post featuring the undershirt with the sweater vest is significantly more successful in terms of like count. This can be attributed to the pairing appealing to the viewers' already existing fashion preferences. The familiarity of the concept facilitates viewers' understanding of the content, and thus their preference for it.

Figure 8: Successful Post Demonstration for Familiarity Factor

In this post, the model is wearing a turtleneck under her sweater vest. This allows for the concept of a sweater vest to be easily "digestible" for the viewers, as the outfit matches their fashion taste. Furthermore, the turtleneck is also an item that is widely accessible, and as a result of the post, viewers may be incentivized to recreate the outfit at home. Data source: Instagram (instagram.com) [24].

Figure 9: Unsuccessful Post Demonstration for Familiarity Factor

This post demonstrates the absence of a familiar concept, as the sweater vest is worn by itself. Because this is not a commonly seen outfit combination, viewers are less familiar with the content, and thus less willing to engage. Data source: Instagram (instagram.com) [25].

6d. Innovation

In addition to the usage of familiar concepts, creators must also innovate trends to capture the interest of viewers, while also adapting to the constantly evolving nature of trends. Replicating the same concepts/ideas within a trend can create a stagnant environment. Changing and customizing aspects of the trend to suit one's personal interests can create a much more engaging community. Furthermore, altering familiar concepts in a trend to suit the current generation's interests can have a significant impact on content performance.

Innovation in the sweater vest can be recognized by changing aspects of the clothing to fit the changing interests and desires of consumers. When comparing a vintage image (Figure 10) of how the sweater vest looked with current images, it is evident that certain aspects are kept while others are altered. The structure of the vest has remained constant throughout decades, yet the style has evolved over time to appeal to consumers.

Figure 10: Depiction of Old Sweater Vest

A man wearing a sweater vest in 1974 [26]

As illustrated in Figure 10, the old sweater vest was commonly made of materials such as cotton and wool, and this feature was kept the same throughout the years. Additionally, the V-Neck, sleeveless style of the item has also remained constant. However, the current sweater vests now follow oversized and cropped styles (Figures 11 & 12), which are popular styles within the modern generation. The crop top, for instance, is expected to grow at a CAGR of 4.5% from 2021 to 2030 [27]. Oversized fashion, too, has been popularized, through early 2000s Hip-Hop celebrities' influence [28].

Figure 11: Modern Sweater Vest

Although staying the same in most aspects, one alteration to the sweater vest is its cut. As seen in the post, the modern sweater vest is now cropped, which fits current fashion trends and preferences. Data source: Instagram (instagram.com). [29]
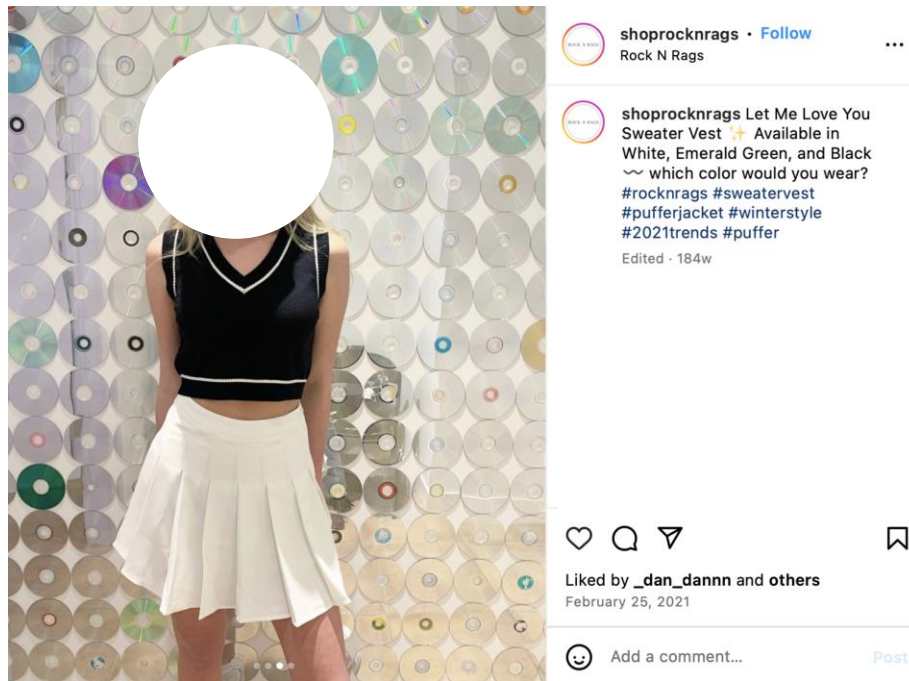
Figure 12: Modern Sweater Vest (2)

Similar to Figure 11, the sweater vest has remained relatively the same in many aspects, with only one aspect drastically changed. In this post, the sweater vest is oversized, which has been a fashion preference amongst the current generation for quite some time. Data source: Instagram (instagram.com). [30]

Although there is no content to compare the new sweater vests with, current styles have not appeared until recent years, while the original style has remained since its creation. This implies that the fashion industry has changed aspects of the item not present before, to suit the current trends of the generation. Adapting

to the latest styles allows for the posts to earn significant metrics, ultimately leading to success for the account.

6e. Entertainment

The ability to entertain viewers—whether through comedy, storytelling, or other available methods—can lead to content success. Entertainment facilitates grabbing viewers' attention, watch time, as well as likelihood to engage with the content—due to the fact that they experience positive emotions from the content.

Entertainment can be defined as anything of interesting value offered to the viewers that will elicit a positive emotion, incentivizing them to continue watching the content.

Although some elements such as storytelling can be difficult to demonstrate on Instagram, as they only allow media posts and short-formed videos, the example post (Figure 13) displays entertainment through dancing in a dress-up routine post—an interesting aspect of the content. Additionally, the post utilizes aesthetically appealing elements, such as bold text, color schemes, and camera composition, further grabbing the attention of viewers.

As seen in Figure 13, the post also displays a positive consensus from the comments (64 comments) regarding dancing, demonstrating that it is indeed a significant factor when it comes to facilitating engagement. In contrast, the content seen in Figure 14 does not use many of the elements used in Figure 13—though there are synchronized clips with the music, dancing, and text that are both absent. There are fewer comments on the post as well (22 comments), and most discuss the outfit in the video, rather than any entertaining element.

Having entertainment included in content allows for greater engagement rates from viewers, due to the ability to capture and maintain attention. Even with limitations, it is possible to find a strategy and create positive emotions within the audience, thus earning high engagement—as long as something of value is offered in the content.

Figure 13: Example of Successful Entertainment in Content

This post is an example of successful entertainment usage; with the incorporation of dancing, music with synchronized clips, and bold text—viewers become interested, and incentivized to continue watching the video. Data source: Instagram (instagram.com). [31]

Figure 14: Example of Unsuccessful Content, demonstrating Lack of Entertainment

Contrary to Figure 13, this video has limited elements of entertainment; there is no dancing, no text, and most comment consensus regards the creator's outfit rather than any of the mentioned factors. Data source: Instagram (instagram.com). [32]

6. Limitations & Recommendations

Despite the findings—there are limitations to this study. The first limitation is the focus on only one social media platform. Utilizing solely Instagram may not provide a bigger picture, as different platforms utilize different algorithms and dynamics that affect content performance. The metrics examined in the study focus on mainly reach and engagement, although there are a variety of others that provide valuable insight. Follower count, click-through rate, web traffic, and many more metrics can also display the performance of an account on social media. Primarily studying top/macro influencers can also offer an incomplete view, as smaller creators are able to show different patterns. Furthermore, without input from creators and brands, data analytics are limited. Collecting data through surveys or interviews can greatly strengthen the findings of the study.

The factors evaluated to determine the success of a post may limit the study, as only a handful are selected to analyze. Each of the factors consists of many smaller aspects, which could be examined in more detail. There are likely various other factors that play a role in the performance of content, and a more extensive evaluation of each factor can add further insight into the study. By identifying different factors and analyzing each in-depth, a more holistic and accurate picture of what contributes to performance in social media can be expected.

Additionally, examining a single trend and industry also provides a limited perspective and may lead to findings not being applicable to wider, different contexts. However, social media marketing is found in all sectors and niches, and findings are likely applicable to an extent. Additionally, the focus on short-term trends may also lead to limitations, as social media marketing is constantly evolving throughout the years,

so performing long-term would provide a more insightful scope to how strategies and engagement change over time.

Suggestions to exceed limitations can include encouraging readers to conduct a "micro" experiment on other platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, as these have different algorithms from Instagram. By experimenting with each factor via A/B testing, and evaluating its influence on one's social media account, further insights can be provided on factors and trend success.

For example, businesses can start their experiment with relevance; after creating timely content over a course of several weeks, they can track key metrics and draw insights. Once observations and conclusions are made, businesses can move onto incorporating interactivity elements with the same method as before. Testing each factor in isolation is crucial, as businesses can pinpoint which factor leads to specific outcomes, resulting in a more effective social media plan.

With research like this, additional methods can be discovered to further expand one's social media. By considering, and implementing the factors throughout one's social media campaign, businesses can grow their accounts, and meet their business goals.

7. Conclusion

As social media continues to gain popularity in the digital marketing realm, it becomes increasingly significant for businesses and creators to take advantage of these channels. Through the proper utilization of widely popular trends, one can grow their account exponentially. However due to the wide popularity, it can also be difficult to discern what makes certain content popular, and others unsuccessful, despite falling under the same trend.

By leveraging the five key factors—relevance, interactivity, familiarity, innovation, and entertainment—businesses can expect to see a 3-4x improvement in engagement metrics when timing their posts with trending topics.

Relevance and publishing content in a timely manner was proven to be a significant factor, as individuals found more importance in content that was related to recent events, seasons, periods, etc. Additionally, creating an interactive atmosphere through post elements—such as descriptions, questions, etc.—allowed for a higher engagement rate. The usage of familiar concepts along with the trend also created recognition among the consumers, familiarizing the topic with already existing standards and interests. Along with familiar concepts, the addition of unique elements to recurring trends results in success, as creators must be able to adapt to the constantly evolving consumer interests. Lastly, incorporating entertainment into content results in the audience experiencing positive emotions, thus increasing the opportunity for engagement.

Although seemingly daunting, the nuances of how to create successful trending posts can be addressed with the 5 factors. These factors can formulate a "recipe" for what makes some content successful, and others falter under the same trends. Through the proper harnessing of this "recipe", businesses and creators should be able to navigate through this multifaceted realm of trends, and eventually reach their desired goals.

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