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How Couples YouTube Channels Forge "Friendships" With Their Viewers: A Thematic Textual Analysis

Marisol Botello

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HOW COUPLES YOUTUBE CHANNELS FORGE “FRIENDSHIPS” WITH THEIR
VIEWERS: A THEMATIC TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Communication Studies

by
Marisol Botello
December 2021

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ABSTRACT

A “couples YouTube channel” is a YouTube channel where a real-life romantic couple posts videos about their relationship. On YouTube there are hundreds of such channels, and some are so popular that those couples actually make a living creating and sharing their stories. How do they do this? More specifically: what marketing techniques, specifically storytelling practices, do these YouTube couples use to resonate with audiences?

This exploratory, qualitative study seeks to answer this question through a thematic textual analysis of three couples YouTube channels. Using narrative theory and parasocial interaction as theoretical frameworks, the study interpretively analyzes a total of thirty videos. Four themes are identified in these YouTubers’ storytelling practices – “video formulas,” “personal storytelling,” “show, don’t just tell,” and “acting couply.” More, the study identifies an overarching theme of “forging friendships” that ties the other four themes together. In light of these themes, this thesis argues that these couples position themselves as viewers’ “friends.” And this may explain why their channels resonate with audiences. This work can inform others who might be interested in creating this type of content to generate a profit and make a living.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Picture this. You come across a YouTube video of a couple telling the story of how they met. Then, you watch another where they are sharing their morning routine as a married couple. Before you know it, you are binge watching videos about everything from their wedding to life challenges to funny skits. This is the sort of fare you can expect to see on a YouTube couples channel. A “couples YouTube channel” (or “YouTube couples channel”) is a YouTube channel where a real-life romantic couple posts videos about their relationship. On YouTube there are hundreds of such channels. As an article on EliteDaily.com explains:

One minute, they’re planning an elaborate viral internet challenge, and the next, they’re sitting down and talking about the most difficult parts of their relationship. These vloggers let people in on the details of their everyday lives, and after a while, they start to feel like your personal BFFs” (Ellis, 2020, para. 1).

The couples who publish these videos clearly enjoy telling and sharing their stories. However, some have also managed to make a business out of this creative endeavor. Specifically, they generate revenue through YouTube AdSense, as well as from “sponsorships with popular brands, and affiliate links” (Mint, 2021, para. 16). For some, this revenue provides a little extra income. For others, this is their occupation. How is it that everyday people have managed to

turn telling stories about their relationships into an occupation? And can other people do it, too?

Creating content on the Internet is now one of the many ways people generate an income. If having a couples YouTube channel really *is* a viable business opportunity, other couples can and will try to create and market their own channels, too. When they do, these couples will need some guidance on how to do this effectively. But before such guidance is possible, it is important to better understand what these channels are publishing and why it resonates with audiences.

Storytelling, Relationships, and New Media

Clearly, the success of couples YouTube channels has something to do with storytelling, relationships, and new media. Stories and storytelling have been an important part of culture and society for millennia. Most of us are familiar with their basic structure, including that stories have a beginning, a middle, and an ending. They also have other elements such as a plot, characters, and settings (Kent, 2015). In terms of their social function, stories inform and entertain, but they are also a way to maintain relationships, community, and culture (Carey, 1982). Narrative theoretician Walter Fisher (1985) argues that humans are storytelling animals, and that it is through storytelling that we make sense of and evaluate our own choices and actions as well as those of others.

In the mass media era, storytelling proliferated with the introduction of novels, films, and broadcast media. Stories are one important way in which we

make sense of ourselves and others (Weick, 1995). So, it should not be surprising that stories about relationships have made for popular media content. Indeed, stories about relationships are common in a range of genres, including romantic comedies, dramas, soap operas, and sitcoms. And as Hesmondhalgh (2012) explains, the use of such genres is one key way in which media industries market their content.

Today, people are using new media platforms, such as YouTube, not just to consume stories, but also to create them, themselves. Indeed, it can be argued that storytelling is at the root of YouTube's purpose as a platform. In a 2021 Pew Research Center survey, 81% of respondents reported using YouTube -- the highest among social media platforms (second was Facebook at 69%). Additionally, YouTube was one of only two social media sites that saw statistically significant growth in 2019 (Auxier & Anderson, 2021).

Given the importance of storytelling in human life, the popularity of relationship stories, and the ease of telling stories on YouTube, it is not surprising that couples have taken to YouTube to share stories about everyday relationships and that so many people watch them. Is there more to these channels' successes, though?

These channels are as unique as the couples who create them. However, there are also some distinctive patterns in the types of stories these couples post and how they tell them. Many post videos where you get to know the couple, their story, and facts about them. They share details about life events both big

and small. And they participate in plenty of fun video “trends” such as challenges where the audience gets to know them and their relationship a little deeper. But in addition to subject matter, there is also the way these couples create their content, comport themselves, and address their viewers. As Ellis said, they “keep it real while also being endlessly entertaining” (para. 2). And, for viewers, these couples “start to feel like your personal BFFs” (para. 1). How do these channels create that kind of connection?

This Study

In an effort to better understand the popularity of couples YouTube channels and -- perhaps -- help others make a living doing it, too, this study asks the following research question: What marketing techniques, particularly storytelling practices, do couples YouTube channels use to resonate with their audiences?

To answer this research question, this study offers a qualitative, interpretive analysis of videos published by three couples’ YouTube channels -- “AprilJustinTV”, “Cody and Lexy,” and “Marcus and Kristin.” At the time of the study, each of these channels had between 300,000 and 500,000 subscribers. They are not the most-watched channels in the category, but they are popular enough for these creators to generate an income. I chose to analyze these three channels not just because they are reasonably popular and successful, but also because I am very familiar with them. In fact, I have been an avid follower of their content for several years. My familiarity with these channels and their content will

help me make sense of their content, dig below the surface for its meanings, and identify the storytelling practices they use to attract and keep viewers, including myself.

The structure of the study breaks down as follows. In chapter 2, I summarize the existing literature on storytelling and narrative theory; the use of YouTube and other new media, for telling stories; the importance of romance and relationships in storytelling; and the concept of parasocial interaction -- the phenomenon where viewers feel like they have a relationship with the characters they come to know through stories. Each of these areas will prove useful in studying and making sense of these channels and their storytelling practices.

In chapter 3, I describe my qualitative, interpretive research methods in greater detail. Specifically, this study uses an approach known as thematic textual analysis to analyze the videos published by these three couples. Thematic textual analysis involves the careful, interpretive coding of qualitative media content, the identification of relevant themes across that content, and the analysis of those themes in relation to the research question. So, in this study, I code 10 videos from each of these three channels using the audio-visual coding software, Atlas TI. I organize those data to identify key patterns in these couples' storytelling practices. And I consider how those practices may resonate with these channels' audiences.

In chapter 4, I present the four themes identified in these couples' storytelling practices using the thematic analysis process described above. I

provide a definition and description of each theme and a few exemplars to illustrate how the theme manifests in the videos I analyzed. I also discuss how each of these themes is related to the research question.

In chapter 5, I summarize the four themes identified. As I do, also identify some commonalities across those themes, including an overarching theme. This overarching theme, it is argued, may be particularly important for understanding how these channels resonate with audiences. In this chapter, I consider the strengths and limitations of the study; the implications for other couples who may want to venture in this route as a career option; and how this study fits in and adds value to the field of communication studies.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

History and Theory

Stories are powerful. They help people understand both events and the world (Weick, 1995). They even help people understand themselves. As Gottschall (2012) states “humans are creatures of story, so story touches nearly every aspect of our lives” (p. 15). Kent (2015) describes storytelling as having “its roots in oral traditions and Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy” (p. 481). They are powerful for a few reasons; they stem from memory, they come with many indices, they are cathartic or help people relive certain experiences, and make people feel part of a shared experience (Woodside, 2010). In oral societies, the main purpose of stories was to pass down traditions, beliefs and anecdotes among the people in any given geographical area (Kent 2015, p. 481). Today, we have many more ways to create and share stories, including print media, the telephone, broadcasting, and, most recently, the Internet. Still, stories serve similar functions; they “shape how people perceive events and make sense of the world” (Kent, 2015, p. 481).

Narrative theory is a key framework for studying stories and storytelling. Narrative theory “starts from the assumption that narrative is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with fundamental elements of our experience, such as time, process, and change” (Project Narrative, para. 2). A major narrative theoretician, Walter Fisher (1985) argues that humans are natural storytellers

and that we are likely to resonate with stories if they are coherent and have fidelity. In other words, we are likely to resonate with a video or story if it is coherent with what we are used to seeing in other media or in real life.

Additionally we are also likely to resonate with a story if it has fidelity, or in other words, if it matches with our own lived experiences and beliefs. In other words, stories help people make sense of themselves and the world around them. As such, Sandberg (2016), best explains narratives by stating that narratives are stories that people tell from personal experience (pp. 153-154).

So what are the characteristics of stories? In terms of their structure, stories have a beginning, middle, and end -- or, as Kent (2015) describes it, "a continuing point." They also include elements such as plot, characters, settings, and some sort of climax (Kent, 2015). Additionally, some stories involve familiar character types such as heroes and villains, and the grouping of stories in similar categories called genres (Sandberg, 2016, p. 154).

When it comes to studying narratives, narrative theorists such as Sandberg (2016) focus on the topics of stories, specific story elements, and certain characteristics of how stories are structured. Sandberg (2016), uses the example of temporality and causality in how stories are told. Temporality refers to the telling of stories in chronological order whereas causality refers to cause and effect (p. 164). Others, such as Stapleton and Wilson (2017), study form and content by analyzing the templates "through different course activities and speakers" (p. 61).

Storytellers rely on pre-established templates. Wertsch (2008) makes a distinction between a *specific narrative template* and a *schematic narrative template*. According to Wertsch (2008), a specific narrative template is “organized around particular dates, settings, and actions, whereas schematic narrative templates are more generalized structures used to generate multiple specific narratives with the same basic plots” (p. 140). In the context of mediated stories about romance and relationships a specific template would be a story which includes specific dates, times, locations etc. to which the storytellers can point to as evidence. In contrast, a schematic narrative template in relation to relationship stories depicted in mass media can be seen in romantic comedy films. The template for romantic comedy films often sees a couple meeting by fate, encountering problems or obstacles to be together, and, in the end, overcoming those obstacles to live “happily ever after.”

Narrative theorists do not just study the characteristics of stories, they also study how they are told. According to Stapleton and Wilson (2017), “The same basic story can be told in different forms on different occasions of telling” (p. 61). More, Bruner (2004) adds that storytelling “is a selective achievement of recall” (p. 693). When it comes to stories, we do not just tell them as they happen; we make storytelling choices. In other words, narratives are *constructed* (Bruner, 2004, p. 692). Fisher (1985) adds to this by stating that we as humans are storytelling beings that focus on coherence and fidelity when it comes to both telling stories and receiving them. Narratives acquire meaning through use. As

Benkhedda (2016) explains, “a narrative is defined as ‘recognizable’ because it acquires values of truth and importance that are imposed by its very prevalence in a given cultural environment” (p. 46). Some of the major cultural environments where people learn narratives and the templates for structuring them include: cultural institutions, from families, school, church, and the media (Wertsch, 2008, p. 139).

Narrative theory focuses on how stories are structured and work. However, Andrews et al., (2013) note that narrative theory also attends to “who produces [stories] and by what means” (p. 4). Taylor and Isgro (2018) further note that “narrative research also allows scholars to investigate who consumes particular stories and who is silenced, marginalized, contested, and accepted with particular effects” (p. 4). Such considerations are important for understanding how and why stories are produced, and with what implications.

Storytelling, Marketing, and Parasocial Interaction

Tying this back to mediated storytelling, it is important to stress the relationship between storytelling and marketing. Hesmondhalgh (2012) notes that culture and industry were once distinguishable. A church or wealthy patron might have commissioned the creation of a book or a piece of art, or a community might have put on its own play, but such culture was not created to make money, itself. But in today’s “cultural industries,” such as music, film, and fashion, culture is a thing to be “bought and sold” (Hesmondhalgh, 2012, p. 24).

The cultural industries are particularly risky business ventures, though. For instance, media like films and television are quite expensive to produce, and audiences respond rather unpredictably to these taste-based cultural products (Hesmondhalgh, 2012, p. 27). In response, cultural industry firms adopt strategies to reduce their risk. One important strategy for this project is the use of “formatting.” Hesmondhalgh identifies three key types of formats: the star system, genre, and serials (Hesmondhalgh, 2012, p. 32). The star system associates the names of star writers, performers, and so on with texts. Genres suggest to audiences the kinds of satisfaction and reward audiences might attain by using the product. And serials refer to things like sequels and prequels (Hesmondhalgh, 2012, p. 32).

Tying this back to narrative theory, formats play a crucial role in marketing stories to audiences. After all, media marketing is intended to try to get as many eyes and ears on their stories as possible. So, understanding the relationship between consumers and content is crucial in order for media marketing to be successful.

Here, the concept of parasocial interaction is important. Parasocial interaction describes the way some media users or viewers respond to the stories and characters that are portrayed in the media. As Giles (2002) explains, users demonstrate a parasocial interaction when they “respond to a figure as if s/he was a personal acquaintance” (p. 289). An example of this would be attributing characteristics to a figure on television and then responding as if they

are part of our social network in real life (Giles, 2002). This concept has clear relevance to marketing. Media that are better able to foster parasocial relationships will, presumably, be more likely to retain viewers, readers, and listeners.

The Portrayal of Romantic Relationships in Traditional Media

Before looking into how storytelling is changing in the new media era, it is important to look, first, at how romantic relationships have been portrayed through traditional media, such as television and film.

Commercial mass media portrayals of romantic relationships can be organized into some familiar themes. Hefner and Wilson (2013) explored the presence of romantic ideals in the top 52 highest grossing romantic comedy films using a quantitative content analysis method. These included themes such as love conquers all, idealization of partner, soul mate/one and only, and love at first sight. They found that the most common portrayals of romance were that of love conquers all and soulmate/one and only (p. 161).

The topic of love is one of the most common on television. Toner (1988), analyzed themes in different television shows that had some sort of romantic storyline. In the show, *Jack and Mike*, “audiences [saw] two loving individuals who manage to keep their marriage together and happy in spite of all the pressures in our society” (p. 6). According to Toner, the show’s main themes not only dealt with marital problems that are normal within romantic relationships, but it also portrayed themes relevant to sex role identities and modern marriages,

including that it is no longer just men working to make an income. Another show analyzed by Toner was *Scarecrow and Mrs. King*. He notes that this show “reinforces the more traditional sex role stereotypes” (p. 7).

In terms of who is depicted in mass media romances, Tamara de Souza and Sherry (2006), note that most relationships portrayed in adolescent television were between married or dating Caucasian couples. They also note that these romantic couples infrequently experienced conflict, and where there was conflict, it was usually initiated by the female in the relationship. Stories always concluded with a happy ending.

Romance stories in traditional media often focus on characters’ traits and behaviors. Anderegg, et al. (2014), found that “prime time television couples exhibited the following behaviors which relate to romantic relationships: positivity, understanding, self-disclosure, assurances, relationship talks, tasks and networks” (p. 745). Interestingly, though, these behaviors would change depending on the genre that the romantic relationship was portrayed in. A viewer watching a comedy with storylines about romantic relationships will get a different picture of romantic relationships than one watching a drama (Anderegg et al., 2014).

When it comes to the portrayal of romantic relationships on the big screen, romantic comedies are a particularly prominent genre. According to Grindon (2011), romantic comedies follow a familiar formula when it comes to storylines. He explains the basic romantic comedy plot this way:

A couple meets and falls in love. Obstacles intervene to separate the lovers. The body of the action involves wrestling with the obstacles until the couple can be united, usually in marriage. The nature of the obstacles becomes the distinguishing quality of these tales and the courtship practices, sexual mores, and gender cultures of every era establish the variables (Grindon, 2011, p. 9).

He then goes on to explain that the main areas of romantic comedies relate to the characters, the plot, conflict, setting, and love and laughter.

McCaulley (2019) looks at the narrative structure of romantic stories. She explains that there are seven story parts (or “beats”) that help bring to life stories in the romantic comedy genre. Those “beats” she says were first listed in Billy Merrit’s book *Writing the Romantic Comedy* published in 2001. In the book he lists the seven “beats” that are present in romantic comedy movies. Those beats are: the set-up, the cute meet, a complication, the midpoint, the swivel, the crisis climax and the joyful defeat. New media likely draws on these familiar strategies. However, there may also be novel aspects in new media storytelling, too.

New Media, Convergence Culture, and YouTube Storytelling

The term “new media” is generally associated with smartphones, the Internet, computing, and other digital technologies. “Old” or “traditional media,” on the other hand, include mass media, such as newspapers, film, and broadcast television, as well as one-to-one communication technologies, such as letters and the telephone.

A key distinction between old and new media is that “new media” consumers typically have a “more active role in both the production and consumption of media” (Horan, 2020, pp. 148-149). Jenkins (2006) uses the term “convergence” to describe this process and more. He refers to convergence as, “flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (p. 2). This has big implications for how the media works today. Most importantly, there are now many more options for sharing and consuming all sorts of stories and other content. But old media forms and institutions are not disappearing. Rather, they are converging, being shared, and interacting with new formats. It is “where old and new media collide” (Jenkins, 2006).

The video-sharing platform, YouTube exemplifies these processes. YouTube was founded in 2005 as “a platform where amateur users could upload and share their videos online” (Holland, 2016, p. 2). This structure gave users a much bigger role in the production and circulation of media. On the one hand, users could now be “active participants” by creating their own content without the need or approval of the big, traditional media companies (Horan 2020). Additionally, YouTube audiences are able to interact with videos by commenting on them and sharing their opinions directly with the creators. This is something old media users were not able to do nearly as quickly or easily.

The expansion in the number of people who can create and share videos, and increased interactions between audiences and creators have impacted the way people tell visual stories. For instance, Holland (2016) analyzed the qualities of 3 successful YouTubers and found a few commonalities in their content. These YouTubers' videos were typically filmed in the comfort of their own homes and included background music or objects in their videos. According to Holland (2016), "to a viewer, the lack of professional lighting, scripts and a set made the experience of watching a YouTube video more relatable" (para. 7). Additionally, their content was also pretty short in length compared to a traditional, 30-minute television show. And they kept a consistent uploading schedule of at least once per week, which she feels added to their popularity on the platform.

In keeping with "convergence culture," though, some aspects of old media have made their way into YouTube. Importantly, YouTube's acquisition by Google in 2006 also contributed to the professionalization of the platform. Kim (2012) explains that, "If the pre-Google era of YouTube is characterized by amateur-produced videos in an ad-free environment, the post-Google purchase stage is characterized by professionally generated videos in an ad-friendly environment." (p. 56). The potential for monetizing their channels has led YouTube creators to pay more attention to their content and increase the quality in order to become more ad-friendly (Holland, 2016). So, while YouTube has changed some of the ways people tell stories and interact with audiences, the commercial structure of YouTube has also led to the professionalization of

those practices. As such, it is important to understand what YouTubers are doing, specifically related to marketing and storytelling practices that may be aiding them in monetizing their channels.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

It is clear that stories are an important part of human existence and human communication. Narrative theory helps us understand the importance of the story structure and how stories are told. It is also important to understand from a marketing perspective what YouTubers are doing to grow their channel and audience which will ultimately lead to more ads and paid collaboration opportunities.

This leads us to this study's research question again, which is: what marketing techniques, particularly storytelling practices, do YouTube couples use to resonate with their audiences? To answer this research question, I will use thematic analysis -- specifically thematic textual analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach in which the researcher identifies themes in the data related to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Howitt & Cramer, 2011). According to Braun & Clarke (2006), thematic analysis involves generating codes, categories, and, eventually themes. This method is best suited for my study because it will allow me not only to observe what is going on at the surface level, but to dig deeper into the patterned meanings of these texts.

Sampling

This study examines a purposive sample (Palys, 2008) of three YouTube channels: AprilJustinTV, Cody & Lexy, and Marcus and Kristin.

The stars of AprilJustinTV are April and Justin, who post vlogs about their family life as an interracial couple with two kids (April is of Asian descent, and Justin, Caucasian). As of 4/15/21, AprilJustinTV had 340,000 subscribers, and their most popular video has 2.4 million views.

The Cody & Lexy channel features Cody and Lexy, who are both originally from Florida and are living in LA pursuing their acting dreams. Their channel is composed of videos related to getting to know them as a couple, challenges and trendy videos. As of 4/15/21, Cody and Lexy had 348,000 subscribers, and their most popular video has 2.3 million views.

Marcus & Kristin are related to Cody and Lexy (Marcus and Cody are brothers). They are also originally from Florida and living in Los Angeles to pursue their careers. They post videos about their life which include challenges, update videos and storytime videos as well. As of 4/15/21, Marcus and Kristin had 452,000 subscribers, and their most popular video has 5.7 million views.

According to Palys (2008), purposive sampling is when the researcher chooses their sample strategically -- not based on the representativeness of objects or people studied, but based on their relationship to the research's question and objectives. I strategically chose these specific channels for a few reasons.

First, I am very familiar with their form and content. I would consider myself an avid fan of their work. I discovered AprilJustinTV over 6 years ago and it was one of the first channels on YouTube that introduced me to "couples

channels.” Shortly thereafter, I discovered Cody & Lexy, which led me to Marcus and Kristin’s channel as well.

Some might see my fandom as a form of “baggage” that biases my perception of these channels and their content. However, Tracy (2020) argues that there is “wisdom” in experience. She explains that, “rather than deny our way of seeing or being in the world,” as qualitative researchers we should acknowledge and embrace such knowledge (pp. 2-3). So, my fandom is also an asset. For one, I already have considerable insight into these channels, the characters, the stories they tell, and how each has changed over time. This will be helpful in identifying meaningful patterns across the data. For instance, knowing background information about the specific couples I am analyzing, their on-camera personalities, and how channels like this work will allow me to move forward without having to spend extended time familiarizing myself with this type of content.

These channels are also fairly popular within the YouTube space. All three channels have between 300- and 500 thousand subscribers. Each channel’s most popular videos have over 2 million views, and Marcus and Kristin’s most popular video has 5.7 million views. This is important because I am specifically interested in how storylines relate to marketing. So, by looking at particularly popular channels, I have a good opportunity to see such story-based marketing strategies in practice.

Finally, these channels all seemed well-suited for a thematic study of storytelling practices. Though I had not (yet) systematically studied these channels' storytelling practices, it was clear to me that they did employ some stock storylines and common practices. For instance, I knew that all of these channels published videos pertaining to life events, tragedy, happiness, and accomplishments. So I was reasonably confident that I would be able to identify some common themes that could help me answer my research question.

Coding and Data Analysis

As previously mentioned, I collected and analyzed my data using thematic textual analysis. First, I sorted the videos on each channel ranking from most to least popular. Then, I watched and coded the top 10 videos from each channel by following a modified version of Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step model for thematic analysis: familiarization with the data, initial coding generation, searching for themes based on initial coding, review of the themes, theme definition and labeling, and report writing.

I say "modified" because, as a fan of these channels, I did not require the same familiarization that someone who was new to these channels would have. More, I chose not to transcribe the dialog in the videos, as is common with other qualitative approaches, such as long interviews. Rather, I skipped directly to coding the audio-visual material itself. Specifically, I used Atlas TI -- a qualitative data analysis program that allowed me to watch and listen to the audio-visual materials and code directly as I go. This was more than an expedient approach.

Doing so allowed me to code the audio-visual material and organize those data all in one place. More, by coding the audio/visual material, I reduced the risk of missing certain audio-visual cues that can be lost when just focusing on transcribed material. This is important because storytelling goes beyond the written word. It can include the organization of events, location of filming, date of filming, date of posting, and certain nonverbal gestures by the people involved in telling such stories.

During the initial coding phase, I carefully watched each of the top-10 videos from each channel. As I watched, I used Atlas TI's annotation tools to make brief, interpretive descriptions about what the couples were saying or doing, and how that was being presented to me. For example, in one of their videos, titled, "Husband tries to speak spanish," Cody and Lexy zoom in on Cody's face after he said something, and they put funny music over it. This editing created a funny moment, and I coded this as "funny editing." I followed this same process with the rest of the top-10 videos for each of the three channels. In all, I produced 188 codes across the 30 videos coded.

After I was done coding those thirty videos, I had to determine whether I needed to watch additional videos from each channel. To make this determination, I reflected on whether I had reached a "saturation point." Tracy (2020), describes a saturation point as "the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to emerging findings and themes" (p. 174). For this specific study, I felt I had reached a saturation point

after coding the 30 videos because, with each additional video watched, there were no new categories being identified at that point.

Once I had gone through the initial coding process, I then moved on to the next phases, what Braun and Clarke call searching for themes. I organized my codes into categories, worked to distinguish them from one another, and evaluated whether any were candidates for potential themes. After organizing the codes into different categories I sought to describe what was happening in each potential theme identifying providing exemplars that would help explain each theme. Initially, I had six categories but, after reviewing them as potential themes, I realized that some of the categories could be condensed and ultimately reduced them to four. As Braun and Clarke (2006) explain, thematic analysis involves “an ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells.” (p. 87). In the next chapter, I detail the four storytelling themes I identified and begin to tell the story of how they seem to work to resonate with audiences.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS

This study aimed to identify the marketing techniques, specifically the storytelling practices that couples YouTube channels use to resonate with their audiences. As explained in Chapter 3, I selected three such channels for analysis based on my familiarity with them and their relatively sizable followings. I then analyzed thirty total videos -- the ten most popular from each channel. Specifically, I used a qualitative, interpretative approach known as thematic textual analysis. Thematic textual analysis involves interpretively analyzing and coding qualitative data, and then organizing those data into themes that can help answer the research question.

In this chapter, I identify and richly describe the four themes identified, as well noteworthy sub-themes. Additionally, I will provide some exemplars from the videos themselves. Along the way, I will explain how each theme is related to my research question.

“Video Formula”

One important theme that was evident in the videos published by these YouTube couples channels was the use of what are referred to here as “video formulas.” A video formula, for the purposes of this study, is a specific set of formulaic formatting practices YouTubers engage in when capturing, editing, and producing their videos. Such formulas include the use of video intros, previews of

what the video will be about, calls to action to subscribe or follow creators on other social media platforms, and outros. Perhaps not surprisingly, this theme was coded in every video studied in the sample.

Formulaically, these channels' videos all begin with that couple's standard channel introduction. Take, for instance, the introductory sequence to Cody & Lexy's video, "Asking what men really want to know (with Kristin Johns and Sazan Hendrix)." This video opens with a "behind the scenes" snippet where Cody, Lexy, and their guests are waiting to begin filming. As they wait, they are singing a song and the camera pans to show them, as well as a bit of what their set-up looks like (e.g., lights, camera, equipment set-up) and a clip of their friend (who is not in the video) playing piano. The video then cuts to their standard channel intro. Snippets of their lives are presented, such as Cody jumping into the ocean, Lexy jumping out of a plane, them at a red carpet event, and them having a "cake fight" at their wedding. Throughout, a short music clip plays over the scenes. The video then cuts to a black screen where the words "Cody & Lexy" pop up.

Channel introductions like this are often paired with a preview of what is to come in that video. Indeed, immediately after this introductory sequence, Cody greets their viewers:

"What's up everybody? Welcome back to our channel. It is ladies night. As you can see we've got Sazan and Kristin today on the channel, and this is going to be a great video because I'm going to be asking you ladies

questions that guys have always wanted to know, and they're going to sound generic to you, and it's going to be obvious answers. But we really are curious: Why do you guys do these type of things?"

Together these selections constitute this video's intro and preview. YouTubers commonly employ formulaic practices like these when creating content for their channel, and they have a clear marketing logic. For those new to the channel, such introductions offer a friendly greeting and familiarize viewers with the couple. For returning viewers, it provides a sense of familiarity – an opportunity to catch up with friends that have not seen them since their last post. These practices surely aid in keeping and maintaining viewers. However, they may also help build parasocial, friend-like relationships with those viewers. This is because these YouTubers position themselves as friends -- the kinds of people from whom you would expect to hear things like "hello," "goodbye," and "we'll see you next time." Some creators, such as April and Justin, even make it a habit to refer to their viewers as "friends." This may make the viewer feel as if April and Justin regard them as special – that they are not just another "view" or subscriber. Rather, they are the sort of people they might meet up with in "real life."

Another important video formula was the use of calls to action at the conclusion of videos. Such calls to action included requests for viewers to subscribe to that couple's channel, to follow them on social media, or to tune in on a particular day for their next video.

All three of these couples' channels concluded their videos with calls to actions. For instance, Cody and Lexy stated, "Thank you so much for watching. Don't forget to like and subscribe." Likewise, Kristin and Marcus said goodbye in one of their videos by stating, "If you liked it, give it a big ol' thumbs up. If you want to see more make sure to subscribe." And April and Justin did the same by having their son tell the audience to give the video a thumbs up and subscribe.

Such calls to action are clearly intended to retain and grow their audience. In this, they are not so different from other videos on YouTube that tell viewers to "hit the subscribe button." However, much like in their video introductions/previews, these YouTube couples say "goodbye" as if they were talking to good friends -- the types of people they hope to see again in the near future. In this, these couples do not just share videos about *their* relationships. They may also work to build relationships with viewers. And when they do, these YouTube couples frame those relationships as "friendships" -- right down to the "hellos" and "goodbyes."

"Personal Storytelling"

YouTube couples do not only use "hellos" and "goodbyes" as friends do. They also tell stories as if they were viewers' friends. Indeed, a second theme identified among these videos was the practice of personal storytelling. This theme refers to these couples' sharing of personal stories in their YouTube videos. This occurs in various ways. In some of the videos, the entire video

focuses on telling one particular personal story, albeit often with some subplots. In others videos, personal stories are woven into the video here and there through anecdotes, flashbacks, or descriptions.

An example of a video where a story constitutes the entirety of the video is one from Marcus and Kristin titled, "The full story of our accident." In it, the couple tells the story of a bicycle accident they were involved in. Followers of Marcus and Kristin would have known that they had been in an accident, as they had informed their viewers of this through other social platforms. However, viewers presumably wanted to hear the full story of what happened. And Marcus and Kristin used a full video to explain.

In this video Marcus and Kristin tell the story of the accident in very rich detail. They begin by visually inserting several news clips that covered the accident. Then they casually go into telling the story from the moment they decided to go on a bike ride, until the moment that it happened, doing their best to describe what they remember. As they are telling the story Kristin states:

I remember I was awake the whole time, and I was laying down on the concrete, and Marcus was laying next to me. And the first thing I look down I saw my leg was like my left leg was laying across my whole body, and I thought 'oh wow my leg is definitely going to get cut off' -- like amputated. Because it was like Jell-O -- like not a normal leg like. I didn't feel anything from the waist down.

They also included reactions from family members, and even small video clips of the time they spent in the hospital, and how they felt during and after the accident took place. In telling the story, they sat on their bed and took turns narrating what had happened.

Videos like these are often referred to as “storytime” videos within the YouTube creative community, and they may help explain why these videos resonate with audiences. Specifically, these videos may create a meaningful connection between the creators and their viewers because of the intimate details shared. This could happen in two ways. The first is that by sharing the story of their accident they are sharing something that is both emotional and intimate and in a sense relatable -- whether the viewer has gone through something similar or even if they have not. Viewers can easily put themselves in that couple’s shoes and imagine how frightening an incident like that can be.

Secondly, sharing personal stories like this is akin to real-life friendships where friends tell each other stories which helps build their relationships. This study did not specifically investigate the comments associated with each video, but viewer comments for this particular video do suggest that the forging of friend-like relationships is happening. In this particular instance, current followers of Marcus and Kristin knew of their accident, but by watching this video they learned intimate details that they would have never known if Marcus and Kristin had not shared them. In turn, it is evident that this was of interest to their

audience because this video currently sits at #5 when sorting their videos through the most popular video categories on their channel.

An example of stories being woven into a video is Cody and Lexy's video titled, "Husband Tries to Speak Spanish." In this video, Cody and Lexy engage in a challenge where Lexy throws out Spanish words and Cody tries to guess what they mean. Specifically in this video, there is an instance where Lexy asks Cody what "molestar" means to which Cody jokingly responds stating that it means "mole," which is the Spanish word for a Mexican dish. After laughing about Cody's wrong assumption, Lexy goes on to tell a side story of a time when Cody went over to her house and also misunderstood a word that was told to him in Spanish.

Similarly, another example of stories being woven into other stories is Cody and Lexy's video titled "Reading Each Other's Text Messages." One can infer from the title that the video will be about Cody and Lexy reading each other's text messages. However, within this video, Cody and Lexy share other stories that help make the video more engaging and interesting to watch.

Personal storytelling like this may help explain how these YouTube couples resonate with audiences. They are not only sharing a fun video showcasing their relationship. They are also telling personal stories about that relationship through various structures, one of which is the use of anecdotes. So, with each personal story, the audience gets a little more than they initially signed up for. In other words, though the video may be about them reading what they

text each other or about the accident they were involved in, there is a lot of storytelling behind just reading text messages and telling basic details of the accident. It is like they are telling a story or stories of their relationship, but they are telling these stories in a way in which they would tell their friends and close family members. The stories are filled with very personal details.

Show, Don't Just Tell

In addition to using video formulas and personal storytelling, these couples' YouTube channels also relied on showing and not just telling. The "show, don't just tell" theme is where, rather than verbally narrating a story or describing what they are doing, these couples use YouTube's visual capabilities to let the pictures tell the story. This can be done in a couple of ways. The first is by using YouTube's video capabilities to tell a story through images. The second is by creating videos specifically to show the viewer what they are talking about in a particular video, such as in "haul" videos, house tours, and how-to videos.

An example of the first type of video is one that Marcus and Kristin published titled, "Our Wedding Video." This, essentially, is the video of the day they got married. But unlike most other videos on the channel, Marcus and Kristin do not speak or explain what is happening in the video. Rather, the audience gets to see for themselves what their wedding was like.

This video starts with a title card that says "The Wedding of Marcus and Kristin," followed by a clip of them leaving their wedding as they wave goodbye to their friends and family who attended the wedding. The video then cuts to a clip

of the officiant welcoming everyone to the ceremony. The shot widens allowing the audience to see all the wedding guests. Marcus and Kristin stand at the head of the altar holding hands, facing each other, and getting ready to officially be married. Then there are clips of the bridesmaids, the musicians, and a close up of the officiant speaking in front of Marcus and Kristin. The video ends with a shot of her parents sitting next to each other and visibly emotional that this is happening.

This short clip may resonate with viewers in that it showcases an important event in their relationship, as well as some of the key components that make it special to the couple. Audience members get the chance to see all the details as if they were there. In essence, they get to see and experience an occurrence that is typically only experienced by real-life friends and family. It is like viewers are receiving an invitation to their wedding. By specifically visually sharing these aspects of their wedding, these couples continue to forge friendships with viewers in much the same way they would with “real-life” friends; they just do so visually, instead. But rather than verbally narrating their wedding “story,” they tell that story visually with this video.

Another example of the “show, don’t just tell” theme is seen in Cody and Lexy’s video titled “Married Couple’s Morning Routine.” In this video they share all the steps they take each morning as a couple living together. Instead of sharing details verbally (like Marcus and Kristin did when they told the story of their accident), Cody and Lexy visually take the viewers into what their morning

routine actually looks like by inviting them into personal spaces such as their bedroom, their bathrooms, and their kitchen.

For instance, viewers get to “follow” Cody and Lexy into their home. At one point as Lexy shows the viewers her bathroom and she states that her and Cody have separate bathrooms and proceeds to say “let’s go into my bathroom first and then we’ll go into Cody’s.” Not only does she make this statement, but she also shows the audience both bathrooms sharing intimate details such as her makeup and skincare products as well as Cody’s towel warmer that is built into the bathroom that he calls “his” in their home.

Another example of this is present in April and Justin’s video titled “36 Week Pregnancy Doctor Visit + Early Birthday Surprise!” In this video, April shows a few items she received as PR packages from various companies. Some of the items shown were a diaper bag, a mirror, some baby clothing, and other baby items.

By engaging in the act of showing and telling, these YouTubers may create a deeper connection with their audience because they are removing yet another layer into their lives. Audiences are again invited to experience various aspects of their lives, which would normally remain private. By inviting viewers in to their lives, they likely create a stronger connection with their audience, which encourages them to remain loyal to their content and keep coming back week after week. These actions also position the couple as real-life friends by inviting them into their homes and sharing insider details into their lives.

“Acting Couply”

The final theme identified in these three couples' YouTube videos was “acting couply.” Acting couply refers to ways of talking or acting which lead others to conclude that two people are in a romantic relationship. How can you tell if two people are acting couply? Ask yourself: If you saw the couple from afar, based on their actions, would you presume they are in a romantic relationship? Examples of this behavior can include: public displays of affection (PDA), flirting, or being playful, among others. This theme was also, not surprisingly, found in every single video coded in the sample.

Some good illustrations of acting couply can be found in April and Justin's video titled, “How We Met. Our Relationship Story.” In it, April and Justin each take turns describing how they met and how they saw things from their perspectives at the time. As they do, they engage in teasing, PDA, being playful, and flirting, all of which are characteristics of acting couply.

For instance, when April describes what she thought and felt about meeting Justin in person for the first time, she says that she thought he was polite and nice and very handsome. Then Justin teases her and says, “I was waiting for the ‘very’ part.” Meanwhile, April and Justin talk directly to each other, as opposed to looking at the camera, and April has her hand on Justin's chest and shoulder as they proceed to laugh. Later in the video, April mentions that she did not respond to any other messages on the dating website. Then, Justin teases her by asking if she didn't want a “sugar daddy,” to which April

laughs and says “no!” Later, Justin teases April by saying that she is actually older than him, so in essence she is “robbing the cradle,” and they both proceed to laugh and share a little bit more about themselves.

Through such “couply” actions, YouTubers like April and Justin clearly mark themselves as couples. In doing so, these YouTube couples may resonate with audiences because they establish themselves as relatable couple in these videos. Viewers may feel like they are just hanging out with friends who are a couple, and, as a result, it feels normal that they would act that way. This may well add to their brand, too. Audiences get used to seeing them and cannot wait for the next video to be released because of the chemistry that is shown on the screen.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Contemporary audiences have an abundance of options when it comes to consuming content. One popular option is YouTube videos, and YouTube couples channels have become a particularly favored category on the platform. On these channels, real-life couples post videos about their relationships. The videos vary from challenges, to day-in-life vlogs, and everything in between. These couples seem to have fun sharing the ins-and-outs of their relationships, but some have also garnered large enough followings to make an income doing so. How do they do this? And can others do so, too?

To better understand this emerging YouTube genre and the business opportunities associated with it, this study examined the video output of three popular YouTube couples channels: the Marcus and Kristin channel, AprilJustinTV and the Cody and Lexy channel. At the time of data collection, all three channels ranged from 300-500 thousand subscribers -- a subscription base that is sufficient to generate an income. Specifically, this study sought to identify the marketing techniques, particularly the storytelling practices, these YouTube couples channels use to resonate with their audiences. To identify those techniques and practices, this study employed a qualitative, interpretive approach known as thematic textual analysis. It is an approach that seeks to look below the surface of texts and identify themes in the content that are relevant to the research question.

This thematic textual analysis generated four themes: “video formula,” “personal storytelling,” “show, don’t just tell,” and “acting couply.” All four themes were undoubtedly found across all three channels analyzed.

The first theme, “video formulas” refers to the formulaic practices all three couples employed when it came to structuring their videos. These included introductions, previews, calls to action for viewers to subscribe to their channels or to return to watch the following week’s video, and outros. These formulas surely help retain and grow an audience, but they may also provide a way for these couples to connect with their audience in a more deep and meaningful way -- as “friends.” These intros and outros provide a way of “saying “hello” and “goodbye,” just as one would with real-life friends. So, by positioning themselves as friends, these couples may forge a bond that feels like it is truly meaningful.

Friends do not just say “hello” and “goodbye,” though. They also tell each other personal stories -- stories that not just any stranger would know. So, these videos also relied on a second theme to resonate with their audiences -- personal storytelling. Sometimes a video told a single personal story, such as how the couple met or something that happened on a particular day. In other cases, shorter stories were used to enhance videos through the use of anecdotes, flashbacks, or very detailed descriptions. Such storytelling may resonate with audiences by creating a deeper layer to the sense of friendship between creators

and their viewers. Through each of these small stories, viewers get a chance to know the creators and who they are as people as if they really knew them in real life. Such engagement seems crucial for the marketing of their channel.

When it comes to telling stories, the couples relied heavily on YouTube's visual capabilities. They used these capabilities to both tell and support the stories they are sharing, hence the theme of "show, don't just tell." Some videos, such as Marcus and Kristin's "Our Wedding Video," were exclusively visual. They let the pictures tell the story. Other videos made use of YouTube's video capacities to provide helpful details, such as in "home tour" and "haul" videos. By visually showing or sharing details from big events to personal spaces, these YouTube couples invite viewers into their lives and give them a chance to experience things from their perspective. Since the YouTube platform is based on the sharing of video content, it is understandable that these couples are trying to maximize the medium's capacities. But by using those capacities to visually bring audiences into intimate spaces and share personal details of their experiences, these couples yet again position themselves as their audiences' friends – the kind of people one might expect to receive such an invite from.

The final theme identified was that of "acting couply." Acting couply is defined as actions that couples take that would lead others to assume they are in a romantic relationship. Whereas the previous three themes were more related to *how* these YouTube couples were engaging in storytelling practices, this last theme focuses more specifically on *what* these couples are doing and saying in

their videos. This specific theme was present across all the videos analyzed for this study which makes sense since these couples are in a real romantic relationship off-screen, in addition to the content they present via YouTube through their content/videos. So it is normal for them to engage in such behaviors since they are in such a relationship. However, it is important to remember that YouTube videos are edited by the creators themselves. In other words, the couples are choosing to “keep” the couply moments in the content they present to their audience. Though creating this type of content to post on YouTube may be done just for fun purposes, it is important to remember that all these couples are also generating an income through doing this.

The themes in this study are all useful in understanding how these couples’ channels may resonate with audiences. But there also seems to be a common thread across all themes: the use of these storytelling practices to create friendships -- or at least the *perception* of the YouTubers as the viewer’s friends. Just like having a couple that you are friends with in real life, they are people who say “hi” and “bye” to you; who tell you their personal stories with intimate details; who share not just stories, but photos and videos of their life; and who are comfortable acting couply around you. Though this is not a study that focuses on audiences and their reception of these videos, these practices all seem to be pointing in the same direction -- that forging friendships is key to these couples’ marketing strategies.

Limitations

No study can address all dimensions of an issue, and, as with any study, there is always room for improvement. One limitation of this study is the small sample size. Since this study only involved three couples' YouTube channels it would be incorrect to assume that the themes identified are generalizable to all YouTube couples channels. As an avid YouTube viewer of these and other YouTube couples channels, I can say that the ones studied here are rather typical. So, I would not be surprised if these themes were common across the genre. Additionally, if these techniques do work to resonate with audiences, then we should not be surprised to see other YouTubers mimicking these same practices. The only way we would know for sure is to do a more systematic quantitative analysis that studied a larger body of content, though.

This study also employed a qualitative, interpretive approach where I, as the researcher, identified the themes based on my perceptions of the content of these channels. Different people can view things multiple ways, though. So, the way in which I viewed these videos and identified themes is not the only way to make sense of these channels' content. Recognizing this limitation, I tried to be transparent about my process, and I aimed to be as detailed and specific as possible about the themes I found. This included my use of theme definitions, the identification of sub-themes, rich description and exemplars for each, and an explanation of how I was understanding those findings and their relationship to the research question. This was an attempt to allow others to see and

understand things the way I did, even if they, themselves, may view and interpret things differently.

Finally, since this study was conducted as a descriptive study aiming to see what was happening and present through the content on these YouTube channels, it does not tell us why creators are using the techniques observed. To answer the explanatory “how and why” questions more definitively, other methodological approaches such as talking, surveying, or observing YouTube creators and consumers would need to be employed.

Strengths

Though the sample size for this study was very small, it allowed me to look at these channels in much greater depth, pay attention to nuances, and make better sense of what those messages might mean for audiences. Additionally, by employing a thematic textual analysis, I was also able to engage with the data in greater depth and really look below the surface to see and interpret what was happening in these videos. A great aid for me in conducting this study was that I was already familiar with their content, and it was not new to me. I had never really analyzed content the way that I did here, and I was surprised by some of what I found while conducting this research. For instance, while analyzing these videos, I observed the importance these YouTubers place on building a bond and connection with their viewers, and that, when they do so, they frame that relationship as a “friendship.” It was interesting to see how this friendship-forging occurred through not just one, but all four of the themes.

Employing the thematic textual analysis approach allowed me to do this because thematic textual analysis is open-ended and interpretive. I was interested in looking at these couples' storytelling practices, but did not narrow my attention to any specific practices. Rather, I approached the data with an open mind and that allowed me to make surprising findings.

Future Research

Content creation on the Internet, specifically via YouTube, is not going anywhere, and there are many more opportunities to explore this and other related topics. For future research it would be interesting to analyze more couples YouTube channels and see how widespread these techniques are. This can be accomplished through a quantitative content analysis, which could provide interesting insight into how many couples are using these and other storytelling techniques and with what regularity. It would also be interesting to look at this information from different perspectives including that of the audience or even the creators. How do audiences use and make sense of this content? And why do creators tell stories and market their channels the way they do? With such insights, it would be interesting to juxtapose the audience's perspective with the creator's to see how they complement or contradict each other.

But before doing so we should actually find out whether these techniques really do resonate with audiences. This can be done through the implementation of an experiment. Specifically, in order to really find out whether these techniques resonate with audiences, a controlled experiment can be conducted to test how

audiences respond to videos that present some of the themes found in this study, such as “acting couply.” In such an experiment, one group of people would be exposed to videos where the YouTube couple acts very couply, and another group would see videos where the YouTube couple does not act couply at all. Then, a questionnaire could be used to assess these two groups’ enjoyment of the video or their likelihood to watch the channel again (with a questionnaire, for instance). From such an experiment, we could get a clearer sense of whether storytelling practices like acting couply really do resonate with audiences.

This study aimed to identify the marketing techniques, specifically storytelling practices, that YouTube couples use to resonate with audiences. Knowing how YouTube couples channels resonate with their audiences is particularly important for other people who might be interested in doing this sort of thing for a living or for a side income. Though I cannot say for sure whether these techniques will work for others, I can say that these channels use these techniques and they may help explain why these channels are so popular. This is the most we can say from an interpretive, exploratory study like this.

As technology continues to evolve, it is important to understand how content creation works, especially on platforms like YouTube. Perhaps some of the techniques employed on this platform can even translate to other emerging digital spaces. In all, this research contributes to some key areas of communication studies. It help us understand new media and the way people are using these platforms for the fundamental human process of storytelling. And it

also adds to our understanding of how storytelling practices relate to marketing strategy on these platforms.

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