Call-to-Action Invitations Which Effectively Increase Total Subscribers On YouTube

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Abstract

Many people are turning to YouTube for a source of entertainment and information.

YouTube provides anyone with internet access a chance to share videos with the world.

YouTube users can solicit viewers to subscribe to their channel to increase the reach of their

videos. A series of YouTube videos was created with different call-to-action invitations to solicit

channel subscriptions. The results were analyzed using YouTube Analytics. A simple call to

action at the end of the video was the most effective method for gaining new subscribers. Using a

call-to-action invitation worked better than not using a call-to-action invitation. The results were

analyzed under the lens of the Elaboration Likelihood Model developed by R. Petty and J.

Cacioppo; using the central route of persuasion (asking for YouTube subscribers via call-to-

action solicitation) is more effective than using the peripheral route.

Introduction

Online media sources are growing and traditional media sources, such as traditional

television, are declining in popularity. In a 2016 study commissioned by Google, a 2,940-

respondent survey executed by comScore showed millennials preferred YouTube to traditional

television (Heltai, 2016). The research in this paper focusses on what methods YouTube video

creators can use to effectively increase their total number of channel subscribers. The results

showed using a call-to-action technique (asking for YouTube subscribers) is more effective than

not using a call-to-action technique. Furthermore, a simple call-to-action at the end of a video

gained the largest number of new YouTube subscribers.

Many YouTube videos end with a call to action. For example, in a video called *Sun VS.*

Atomic Bomb, Hank Green ends his video by saying, "If you want to have more of this, you can

subscribe at YouTube.com/SciShow" (Green, 2012). Using a call-to-action technique at the end

of a video appears to be the most commonly used method employed on YouTube. There are

billions of videos on YouTube and the scope of this research did not include obtaining a truly

random and representative sample; however, based on research observations, this method

seemed successful. The purpose of this research was to test call-to-action methods with

originally-produced YouTube videos. The conjecture was the most effective method for gaining

subscribers would be a simple call to action near the end of the video. This indeed proved to be

the most effective method tested.

This phenomenon can be explained in part by R. Petty and J. Cacioppo's Elaboration

Likelihood Model (Petty & Wegener, 1999). Petty and Cacioppo developed a model which

explained persuasion. They propose communicating a persuasive message through the central

route (via candor elaboration) is more likely to produce strong attitude changes than going

through the peripheral route (via mental shortcuts) (Petty & Wegener, 1999).

Literature Review

The prime subject of this research is YouTube videos and audience interaction with those

videos. According to the company's website, "Youtube allows billions of people to discover,

watch and share originally-created videos" (About YouTube, 2016). YouTube includes videos

on virtually every subject, most of which are created by amateur videographers; furthermore,

many businesses, companies, government agencies, universities, and non-profit organizations

maintain YouTube channels (Kim, 2012). In her doctoral dissertation, Jin Kim stated, "Merging

different media in hybrid genres, YouTube.com is an online video storehouse" (Kim, 2012).

A YouTube channel is a homepage for a content creator's videos. YouTube video creators

look for subscribers to their YouTube channel because gaining more YouTube subscribes will

gain them more views per video. When someone logs into YouTube, the website features videos

from the channels the person has subscribed to. A subscriber can also sign up for email

notifications from a YouTube channel (About YouTube, 2016).

R. Petty and J. Cacioppo developed a model called the Elaboration Likelihood Model.

According to these researchers, there are two routes for a message to be processed: the central

route and the peripheral route. The central route involves elaboration or "the extent to which a

person carefully thinks about issue-relevant arguments" (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The central

route requires cognitive processing. The peripheral relies on cues and context from the

communicator. This requires little or no conscious thought (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In his

book *A First Look at Communication Theory*, E. A. Griffin wrote, "The peripheral route offers a

mental shortcut path to accepting or rejecting a message" (Griffin, 2012).

Petty and Cacioppo identified six methods for pushing a message through the peripheral

route: Reciprocation (quid pro quo), consistency (routine or tradition), social proof (peer or

social pressure), liking (attractiveness of the communicator), authority (credibility of the

communicator), and scarcity (shortage or availability or resources). Please note, most messages

are not purely categorized as peripheral or central (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). As Griffin points

out, "Most messages receive middle-ground attention between these poles" (Griffin, 2012).

YouTube call-to-action techniques fall in this "middle ground."

The six methods for peripheral persuasion are often used by YouTube channel hosts. For

example, a YouTube channel with many subscribers (social proof), may gain increased

subscribes based solely on this fact. A viewer may subscribe to a YouTube channel based on the

likability or authority of the host or video content, etc. YouTube videos with a call to action use

the central route to attempt to gain new subscribers by setting forth a stated argument on why a

viewer should subscribe. Some may argue a YouTube channel host who does not ask for channel

subscribers is not attempting to use any route of persuasion (central or peripheral); however,

YouTube provides the option for a viewer to subscribe to a channel alongside every video on the

site. All YouTube video creators would benefit from new subscribers and most video creators

seek for new subscribers whether they expressly state it or not. Those YouTube videos which do

not contain a call to action are still engaged in the peripheral route. The Elaboration Likelihood

Model can be used to explain why certain call-to-action techniques work for gaining new

subscribers and will be discussed more in the conclusion.

Methodology

Martha Hunt, a seamstress from Kaysville, acted as a YouTube channel host and instructor in

an original video series. The videos were filmed on Saturdays for several months. Four videos

were released in October one week apart from each other (the exact dates are in a table to

follow). At the same time the videos were being released, Facebook advertisements for the

videos were running to obtain a larger audience. Advertising money was dispersed evenly

throughout the month to avoid creating any variable which increased the views of one particular

video.

Three methods for soliciting YouTube subscribers were used in this study:

1. A call to action at the end of the video
2. A call to action at the beginning of the video
3. An incentivized call to action at the beginning of the video

In addition to these three techniques, a control video was used. This video had no call to

action. The control video was used to test the most peripheral route of persuasion. The

incentivized call to action offered the viewer an award for subscribing. It was then explained that

all subscribers would be entered into a contest ending on November 6, 2016. The winner of the

contest won a free online sewing consolation session with Martha Hunt via online video chat. An

incentivized call to action was not used at the end of any video because Martha Hunt did not

have the time available to do more than one sewing consolation and a different type of incentive

would not have been comparable to the first.

Video title	Call-to-action technique	Release dates
How to Hem a Prom Dress https://youtu.be/OTkfps8GdR0	Control (no call to action used)	October 10, 2016
How to Add Shoulders to a Prom Dress https://youtu.be/6Cx7mpvmUpE	A call to action at the beginning of the video	October 17, 2016
Adding Ruching to a Dress (How to Ruche) https://youtu.be/wU1dsbI3txA	A call to action at the end of the video	October 24, 2016
How to Add Sleeves to a Prom Dress https://youtu.be/mFlK2CtRn_o	An incentivized call to action at the beginning of the video	October 31, 2016

Data was collected from YouTube Analytics (Analytics Overview: Martha Hunt, 2016). The

results are biased towards those interested in dress alteration because the data was collected from

the viewers of these videos only. For example, there were about twice as many female viewers as

male viewers. It is also interesting to note that only a slight majority of viewers (51.9%) were

millennial-age or younger (Analytics Overview: Martha Hunt, 2016). As mentioned earlier,

research commissioned by Google in 2016 demonstrated that millennials prefer YouTube to

television (Heltai, 2016). Nearly half of the viewers of the sewing videos in this research were

above millennial age (30% between the ages of 55 and 64); this is probably due to the

demographics of those seeking to alter special occasion dresses.

This table contains audience data from YouTube (Analytics Overview: Martha Hunt):

Category	Data
Gender	66.3% female 33.7 % male
Location	79.9% United States (country of origin)
Age	4.9% between 13-17 years

29% between 18-24 years
18% between 25-34 years
11% between 35-44 years
6.1% between 45-54 years
30% between 55-64 years
0.6% between 65+ years

Another limitation to this research is that the content of each video differs in the following ways: Popularity, duration, and average watch time. This could have swayed the results. For example, the video about adding sleeves to a dress was the most popular in terms of number of views and had the potential to obtain more subscribers as a result. There may be more people going on YouTube to look up how to add sleeves to a dress than there are looking to hem a dress, etc. The video adding shoulders to a dress had the longest average watch time (on average, the viewers watched a little over four minutes before stopping), but it had the lowest number of total views.

| Video title	Total video time	Average watch time	Number of views
How to Hem a Prom Dress	10:54 minutes	2:35 minutes	62
How to Add Shoulders to a Prom Dress	10:54 minutes	4:11 minutes	44
Adding Ruching to a Dress (How to Ruche)	2:40 minutes	1:25 minutes	54
How to Add Sleeves to a Prom Dress	6:37 minutes	1:59 minutes	86

Also, the first video about hemming was available publicly for the longest amount of time. To accommodate this factor, the number of subscribers gained on a particular video was only counted the week after the video was released. Finally, the time of year and holidays could have affected the results (the last video was released on Halloween).

Research Results

The method which gained the most subscribers was a call to action at the video end of the video. The control video gained no new subscribers. The call-to-action at the beginning of a video gained one new subscriber. The call-to-action at the end of the video gained two new subscribers. The incentivized call-to-action at the beginning of the video gained one new

subscriber. The average watch time of all of the videos was less than the total video time;

however, that does not mean that everyone who watched the videos refused to watch to the end.

Subscribers Gained	Total Subscribers
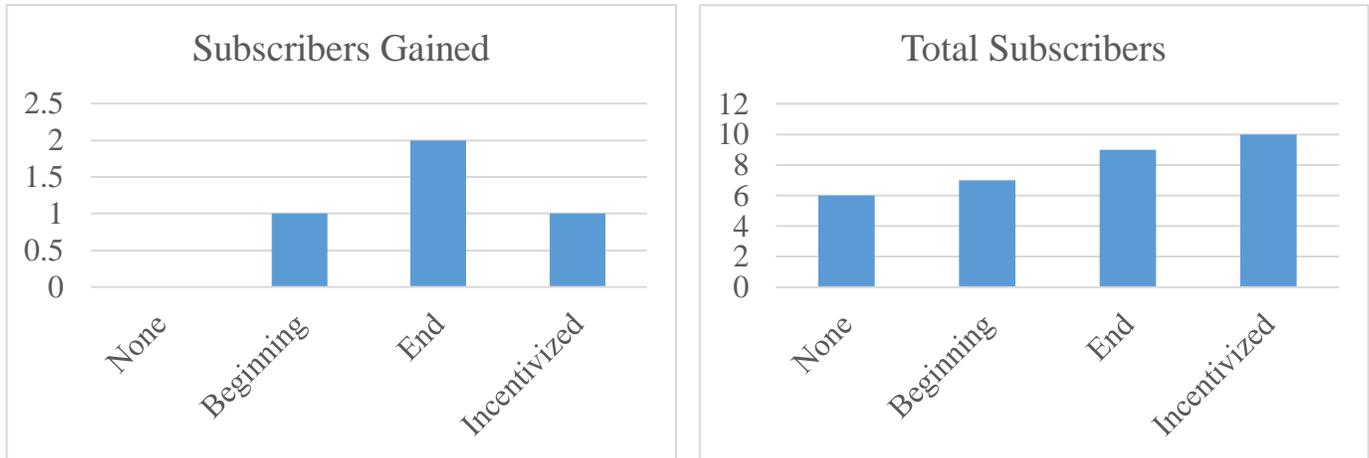
Conclusions

The Elaboration and Likelihood Model explains why asking for subscribers in a straight-

forward manner is more successful than implying the viewer should subscribe. Using a call to

action (as opposed to no call to action)—in other words, going through the central route—is

more effective than purely going through the peripheral route. Every video which asked for

subscribers bluntly gained at least some number of new subscribers. However, using the central

route at the end of the video is more likely to gain new subscribers than going through the central

route at the beginning of the video. Call to actions at the beginning of videos (whether

incentivized or not) appear not to be as effective because viewers may be annoyed with a request

before starting the video. Although this request is expressly stated and goes through the central

route, the viewer has not had a chance to process very many peripheral cues (likability, authority,

social proof, etc.).

Every video, including those going through the central route, used the peripheral route to

gain new subscribers as well. For example, the liking and authority are employed in all videos by

the video host as well as the video content itself. Social proof is also provided on every video

because YouTube shows its users how many subscribers each channel has by default. However,

consistency is employed by using a call to action in more than just one video. Scarcity is only

used when the YouTube channel offers a contest or reward that will expire by a certain date or

because of lack of resources. The incentivized call-to-action technique used scarcity. A table

showing the peripheral route method used by each video can be seen below.

Video title	Peripheral route type	Subscribers
How to Hem a Prom Dress	Authority, liking, social proof	0
How to Add Shoulders to a Prom Dress	Authority, liking, social proof, consistency	1
Adding Ruching to a Dress (How to Ruche)	Authority, liking, social proof, consistency	2
How to Add Sleeves to a Prom Dress	Scarcity, authority, liking, social proof, consistency	1

Further tests with larger sample sizes need to be completed. Statistical correlation cannot be

proven with the data because the sample size is not large enough for a sound statistical analysis.

The results should not be received as applicable to all YouTube channels.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future researchers should attempt to remove all unrelated variables wherever possible. As

discussed earlier, popularity, duration, average watch time, holidays, and time of year could have

affected the results. This could be avoided by releasing the same video with different types of

call-to-action techniques on many different channels. This could also be accomplished by testing

the same video with different call-to-action techniques on the same channel for a small duration

of time and then immediately removing the video before releasing it again at a different time of

the year.

Future researchers should also attempt to obtain a larger sample size. The best method for

obtaining a larger sample size is to gain a larger pool of participating YouTube channels.

Different YouTube channels have different audiences with different demographics. A

collaboration between YouTube and Google would greatly increase the opportunity to obtain a

large representative sample of YouTube channels. YouTube may also be able to help provide

data on the number of YouTube channels currently engaged in using call-to-action techniques

and which call-to-action techniques are currently being used. More funds may need to be

allocated to incentivizing YouTube content creators to participate.

Finally, future researchers may consider testing different aspects of the Elaboration

Likelihood Model. For example, comparisons could be made between YouTube channel hosts'

likeability and credibility and their abilities to gain new YouTube subscribers. Also, if a

YouTube channel host was too explain why the channel is seeking more YouTube subscribers

(an even more persuasive central-route method), a future researcher could test how that would

affect the number of subscribers as well (Petty & Wegener, 1999).

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