

Virality in the fast lane: How businesses can succeed with integrity on TikTok and Instagram

By Annabelle Lei

Author Biography

Annabelle Lei is a dynamic leader and a social entrepreneur, having knowledge in digital media, finance, and the strategy of business. She has occupied important leadership roles in various organizations such as no-profit ones and nationwide bodies, where she led non-competitive events revolving around financial literacy and empowering women. She is a student and a competitive Hip-Hop dancer who has a passion for learning and improving, attending Brown University's Pre-College program and also Hip Hop International. Annabelle possesses intense enthusiasm for collaboration across cultures along with public speaking; this could be seen when she gave a TEDx Talk or took part in public speaking contests. Currently, she is studying at Little Flower Academy in Vancouver, Canada. She uses her experiences from Asia and North America to bring significant social changes and promote leadership growth in various communities.

Abstract

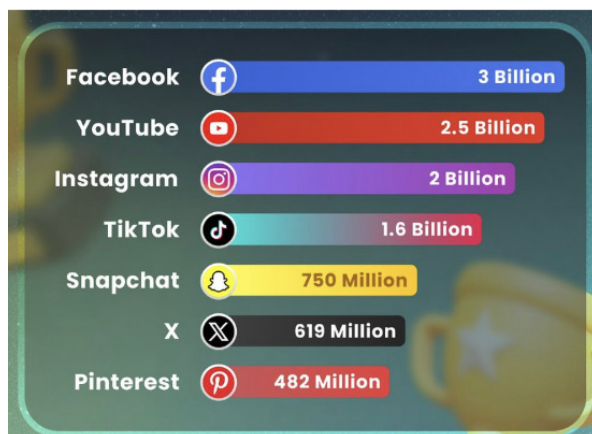
In the quick-paced environment of social media, TikTok and Instagram have turned into crucial instruments for brands to attain digital popularity. This paper examines ways businesses can thrive in this setting while preserving their brand's honesty. It dives into various plans like employing emotional narratives, gentle incorporation of the brand, collaborations with influencers and realizing each platform's distinct algorithms' importance. The algorithms particular to the users of TikTok and Instagram assist businesses in reaching specific audience groups, but they can be problematic when it comes to maintaining uniform brand communications. The research adds a case review of Coca-Cola's "Happiness Factory" advertising scheme as an example; this shows how combining emotional connection with understated branding may bring about viral achievement which increases loyalty and recognition towards the brand. Further, it explores reputation hazards related to forceful marketing techniques within our paper and suggests ways on blending viral material effectively with ethical plus strategic management for brands. In the end, for success in the digital marketing field, companies must always adjust and create new ideas to remain important while maintaining their basic principles.

Keywords: Digital virality, TikTok algorithm, Instagram Reels, brand integrity, influencer marketing, emotional storytelling, social media marketing, brand reputation, viral content strategies, Coca-Cola case study, digital marketing trends, ethical branding

Introduction

In the high-octane world of social media, TikTok and Instagram are twin turbochargers propelling brands into the fast lane of digital virality. Both companies' developers honed massive code bases, or algorithms, to surface different content for different – targeted – audiences. "TikTok takes note of subtle cues, such as how long you linger on a video, to zero in on what users really want to watch" (WSJ Staff, 2021). Instagram's teams refine the details. "Each part of the app – Feed, Explore, Reels – uses its own algorithm tailored to how people use it" (Mosseri, 2021). As of 2024, the monthly active users of Instagram consists of two billion. TikTok reports 1.6 billion (adworldprime, 2024). The massive global audiences drawn to these platforms are also prime audiences for digital marketing for many types of businesses. Total monthly active user count varies significantly across major social media platforms in 2024, demonstrating the importance of platform selection for marketing strategies (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Monthly active users on major social media platforms



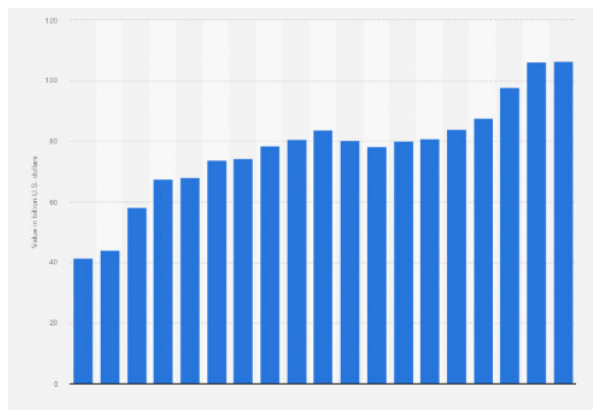
Note: Source: @adworldprime, 2024.

The concept of going “viral” is central to how content is shared across TikTok, Instagram, and other similar social media applications. A random picture or video could spread around the internet within minutes of posting, like a virus spreading uncontrollably. Businesses aspire to utilize virality to their advantage. “It’s the holy grail of digital marketing: the viral ad, a pitch that large numbers of viewers decide to share with family and friends” (Teixeira, 2012). Yet, like any coin, it has two sides. As businesses floor the accelerator of online content, they face a high-stakes challenge: how to steer through the tight turns of fleeting trends without spinning out and losing control of their brand’s reputation. This paper delves into the strategies that can help brands navigate this high-speed world, balancing the need for viral impact with the care required to maintain brand integrity and public image.

The secret of digital marketing lies in the science of viral ads. Harvard Business Review discusses several techniques: constructing joy or happiness right away to keep viewers intrigued, crafting an emotional rollercoaster with an unexpected outcome, or utilizing “brand pulsing,” subtly integrating the brand without overtly flashing the logo in viewers’ faces (Reinartz & Saffert, 2013). A case study by MMA Global focuses on the commercial hit by Coca-Cola, the animated “Happiness Factory,” (The Hall of Advertising, 2019) as a signature example of these techniques (MMA Global, 2024). This ad evokes happiness through a whimsical yet intriguing story about an imaginary vending machine. It uses a fascinating narrative to keep viewers engaged, in which unique characters in the vending machine make each Coke bottle. The advertisement subtly includes the brand in a memorable story rather than simply showing the logo, demonstrating how stories and emotion can greatly improve digital campaigns’ effectiveness.

The commercial successfully engaged primarily young people, from 13-30 years old, while still reaching viewers aged 40-50. The ad accumulated more than 35 million views on YouTube from around the world, with strong involvement on social media – tens of thousands shares, comments, likes and maintained a positive sentiment rate of 90% (MMA Global, 2024). The ad boasted a click-through rate of 12% on digital platforms. It was awarded the Cannes Lions Award for Best Advertisement, just one of seven main advertising prizes. Overall, it displayed the brand's image as a provider of happiness while increasing worldwide brand loyalty. Among the 13-30 age group, there was a 15% boost in brand sentiment for Coca-Cola. Globally the ad helped increase awareness by 10%. Furthermore, the advertisement led to a 20% increase in social media followers and also increased engagement by 25% across digital channels of Coca-Cola. Coca-Cola (KO 0.28%) has generated steady returns for investors, despite unfavorable economic conditions worldwide and consumers' reduced buying power due to inflation. The company was able to sustain good performance and increase its sales, illustrated in the figure below charting Coca-Cola's brand value from 2006 to 2024 (See Figure 2).

Figure 2
Coca-Cola's brand value from 2006 to 2024
(in billions \$USD)



Note: Source: Faria, 2024.

While this is only part of a much larger picture, the strategic use of storytelling, emotional engagement, and subtle branding in digital marketing can bolster share prices by effectively capturing a wide audience, enhancing brand reputation, and driving sustained consumer loyalty, even in challenging economic climates.

While virality can increase a brand's visibility and interaction, it also brings reputational risks. Aggressive tactics must therefore be balanced with an eye toward public image. Beyond storytelling, emotion, subtle brand placement, audience relatability and relevance to current events, and quality of execution all contribute to how viral something becomes (Brito, 2020). Furthermore, ease of sharing (shareability), paid amplification through ads or sponsored content, and simple, clear visual presentation all enhance engagement.

One particularly compelling area businesses can take advantage is influencer endorsements and partnerships (Brito, 2020). Influencers can impart trustworthiness and credibility on a brand, driving more engagement and, ideally, purchases. Collaborating with influencers whose values and target audiences closely align with the brand not only improves credibility but also extends the reach of branded content, particularly on TikTok where content driven by influencers consistently garners a significant following.

In the digital world, online reviews and user-generated content are other critical factors in determining companies' and brands' reputations. This makes managing corporate image more challenging, with around 80% of prospective customers doing research on the internet before buying anything (See Figure 3).

Figure 3
Percentage of consumers who use search engines to research retail products



Note: Source: Andersen, 2021.

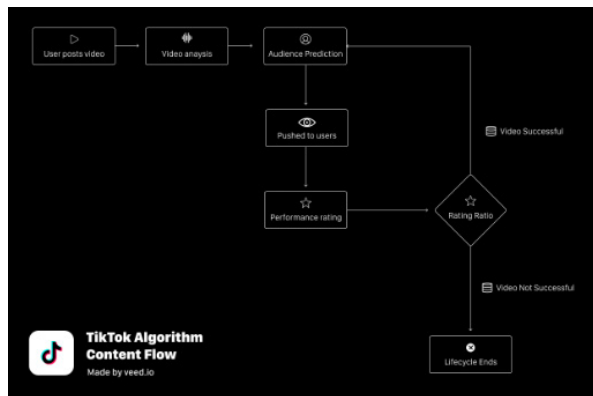
The explosive growth of social media expands businesses' reach but increases the likelihood of reputational breakdowns. Reputational management requires constant observation of public thoughts and talks, pre-empting or quickly addressing content that could harm reputation, and proactively acting to boost positive views. "Audiences are no longer passive" (Ndlovu, 2023). Companies must balance how they see their brands with how others perceive it. While complete control is impossible to maintain over a brand's reputation proper management helps mitigate possible damage. The author recommends that content should be evocative and meet whatever other criteria of virality are relevant, all while adhering to the values and identity of the brand. Trendy content can utilize humor or other more complex emotions but must come across as genuine. Managing audience responses and changing tactics based on feedback also helps reduce risks related to negative perception or controversy. However, creating 'ethical virality' is not easy – "The quest for viral content is not just about luck; it's a blend of art and science" (Copymate, 2024). Businesses must embrace that challenge, however, to succeed in the fast-paced digital era.

Research and examples show that viral content can greatly help a brand's visibility, but companies must find an equilibrium between emotional engagement and brand values to protect brands' reputations. Companies should therefore comprehend the subtleties of every targeted platform's algorithm and audience to create effective content strategies. The results also highlight the double-sided nature of virality on TikTok and Instagram. The TikTok algorithm customizes content according to user responses, making it possible for brands to quickly connect with a very focused audience. However, the platform's fast and sometimes erratic trends can make it very challenging to adhere to messaging strategies while keeping brand image intact. Instagram's segmented algorithm – acting differently on Feed, Explore and Reels – demands a tailored content approach from brands for each section's unique audience behavior. Differentiated content allows for accurate targeting, but it also demands meticulous handling to prevent brand messages from clashing (Hill, 2023).

The platforms keep changing, so marketers need to regularly watch for new trends and adapt strategies. On TikTok, people react more strongly to posts that trigger a significant emotional reaction. Brands must keep an eye on what's currently popular on both platforms and create content which participates in these trends but still represents their brand identity. For example, doing TikTok challenges or joining in with the popular Instagram hashtags that are aligned to the brand's message can boost particular campaigns. On Instagram, Stories or Reels enable storytelling about unique experiences related with the brand, while on TikTok, short videos that tell a story quickly work well. Moreover, the content needs to be adjusted according to the unique traits and anticipated audience of each platform. For instance, TikTok is known for its fast and captivating videos; therefore, it's important to concentrate on this type of content. The TikTok algorithm content flow

(Figure 4) determines the most engaging types of in-feed social content.

Figure 4
TikTok Algorithm Content Flow

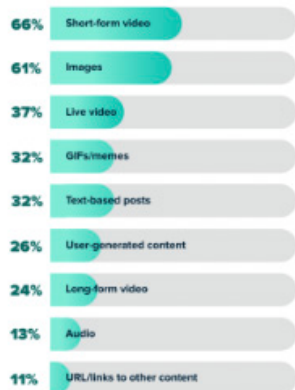


Note: Source: Krysiuk, 2021

On the other hand, Instagram offers various formats such as Reels that are effective for lively videos or Feed posts, and often promote appealing images (see Figure 5).

Figure 5
The Most Engaging Types of In-Feed Social Content

The most engaging types of in-feed social content



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Note: Source: Hill, 2023.

Unified messaging across posts, and even platforms, is another critical tool for companies. This is particularly important on Instagram, where the brand may appear through various content formats such as Feed posts, Stories, and Reels. Interacting with comments and direct messages on both platforms can help shape public perception. Brands should refrain from engaging in contentious trends or topics that may potentially damage their image and instead concentrate on topics that align with their principles and positively resonate with their target audience (Brito, 2022). As a result, maintaining ethical principles for content production fosters and preserves audience trust and brand/business credibility.

Additionally, brands must remain agile, adjusting their content based on real-time performance metrics and audience engagement. To illustrate, if a particular type of content were to thrive on Instagram Reels, brands ought to contemplate posting (with appropriate tweaks to language, imagery, etc.) across other Instagram features for optimal engagement.

Achieving viral success on TikTok and Instagram requires a complex mix of aggressive audience engagement with careful protection of brand reputation. Emotional connection, trend matching, and genuine narratives form the critical pillars of efficient content strategies on these sites. To maintain its brands values and character a company must always monitor public sentiment, quickly react to feedback and follow ethical content creation methods. This research focuses on TikTok and Instagram because each platform has a distinctive algorithm and massive audience. The suggestions shared may not be universally applicable, given that each social media platform has its own dynamics and user interactions. Moreover, the rapid pace of software development and audience interaction on digital platforms makes it

hard to create strategies that are optimized for all situations. Future studies could analyze how new social media platforms like Threads or Byte affect brand awareness and shape reputation. Understanding how Artificial Intelligence algorithms affect visibility and interaction with content might improve digital marketing tactics. Furthermore, comparing viral content strategies across different social media platforms deepens understanding of successful digital marketing. In the race for digital prominence on TikTok and Instagram, brands must skillfully navigate the optimal path to virality by executing the right strategies at the precisely right times, ensuring they maintain control in a constantly changing environment with single-minded focus on the checkered flag of business success.

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