

@ELMO LOVES YOU: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF SESAME STREET SOCIAL MEDIA

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INTRODUCTION

“Elmo loves you!” is an exclamation you may expect to hear coming through the speakers of your television set if you have small children in your house. Perhaps you remember these words spoken by an adorable red muppet from your own childhood – after all, Sesame Street has been on the air since 1969, with Elmo featured as a series regular since 1980. Recently, however, Elmo has been getting attention, but not from anything that aired on Sesame Street. Rather, Elmo made some waves on social media.

Sesame Workshop operates social media accounts for several of their characters across various social media networks, most notably Instagram and X (Twitter). These accounts post in the voices of the characters they represent and have very high engagement with their audience of, presumably, adults. The muppets regularly reference current events and pop culture news and even participate in social media trends.

Observing this phenomenon as on social media feeds makes one think. We know that viewers can develop parasocial relationships with the characters they view on television (Hoffner 2007). We also know that social media users can develop similar relationships with the influencers and celebrities they encounter online (Harff 2022). What, then, is the result of consumers interacting with a television character on social media?

It would be interesting to understand if social media profiles that represent specific television characters are the chicken or the egg. That is, are social media users drawn to these accounts based on an already established connection with that character? Does the social media profile increase that relationship, or simply maintain it as the user transitions from one medium (children’s television) to another (social networking sites). Are these

profiles effective in leading consumers to the source material or are they only effective for those that have an established connection with the character?

This literature review aims to examine the existing research regarding nostalgia, parasocial relationships, and social media. Ultimately, the goal is to understand the level of success that operating social media profiles for fictional characters can bring to their organizations, and what effects these profiles may have on the consumers. The outcomes of this line of research may influence marketing strategies for entertainment companies in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Parasocial relationships between viewers and audiences can be powerful. Tukachinsky, Walter, and Saucier (2020) defined parasocial interactions as “illusionary give-and-take with media figures,” and parasocial relationships as “a lingering sense of intimacy and connectedness with media personalities.” These two concepts are distinct, but related (Tukachinsky et al. 2020). Relationships are more likely to form when the viewer identifies with the character (Tukachinsky et al. 2020). Recent research has also disproven the idea that parasocial relationships form out of a deficiency in real life social interaction; instead, parasocial relationships are more likely to form in those who already tend to develop meaningful real-life friendships (Tukachinsky et al. 2020). Bond (2021) even found that parasocial relationships can be powerful enough as to reduce prejudices in viewers exposed to characters from marginalized communities.

Research has found that people can form parasocial relationships with a variety of sources. In their 2019 study on parasocial relationships between fans and musicians, Kurtin, O'Brien, Roy, and Dam found that increased exposure (such as social media content) led to greater levels of parasocial attachment from the viewers, but that attachment was not necessarily predicated by attraction. In other words, people do not only form parasocial relationships with figures they are attracted to. In fact, Bernhold and Metzger (2020) found that older adults tended to form parasocial relationships with television characters from the programs they viewed out of a desire for companionship – and these relationships could lower depressive symptoms in some cases.

The intensity of the parasocial relationship depends on the relationship of the object to the audience. Giles (2002) suggested a model for studying parasocial relationships that established three orders of intensity of the parasocial interaction experienced by the viewer. First order parasocial interaction is between the viewer and a media figure speaking directly to them, such as a newscaster or most YouTube creators. The second order represents a figure where there is some degree of inauthenticity to the encounter, such as a character portrayed by an actor. Finally, the third order is reserved for fantasy or cartoon figures, which have no real-life counterpart and therefore no chance of meeting or speaking with the character directly.

The nature of parasocial relationships changes as we age. Researchers have found that children can form both positive and negative parasocial relationships with characters, but that they tend to seek out characters that hold a positive relationship on multiple platforms (Jennings and Alper, 2016). However, studies have also shown that younger

children tend to form bonds with less realistic characters, but as they grow tend to have the strongest parasocial relationships with characters that are more realistic (Rosaen and Dibble, 2008). In 1999, Cohen found that teenagers tended to choose favorite characters based on their attractiveness and personality traits. Amongst college students, Eyal and Rubin, (2003) found that they college-aged subjects had the highest levels of parasocial relationship with characters they watched frequently and parasocially interacted with, regardless of how much they identified with them or found them to be realistic.

The study of parasocial relationships is continuing to evolve. In their 2019 inventory on parasocial relationship research, Liebers and Schramm found that nearly half of the studies looked at nonfiction characters such as celebrities and newscasters, while a quarter focused on fictional characters, with the rest being a mix of the two. Finally, they noted that 50.6% of the studies they analyzed were based in traditional media (i.e. film and television). They also found that 18.6% of the studies focused on new media, such as social media. That percentage is sure to have grown in the five years since their inventory was published, some of which is reviewed below.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Much of the research on social media involves the viewer's relationship to influencers, brands, and other media figures. In their 2022 study, Boyd, Morrow, and Rocconi created a survey to measure parasocial relationships on social media platforms. Their results showed that frequent engagement with a celebrity's content can produce a strong parasocial relationship but is not the only factor. It is also interesting to note that, as Badham and Mykkanen studied, people are increasingly getting their news from social

media and less from news broadcasts; this means that news outlets need to foster engagement on social media in a similar way that newscasters were often reported to be the object of parasocial relationships in previous studies. In their 2022 study, Castillo-Abdul, Perez-Escoda, and Nunez-Barriopedro found that social media users engage with various types of posts from brands at different rates, with the most popular posts falling under the category of “social responsibility.” These studies all suggest that users are likely to engage with content that is speaking to them directly (parasocial interaction) or humanizes a celebrity or corporation (leading to identification); these factors echo the elements of parasocial relationships with television characters.

There is little doubt that social media profiles can have a great influence on their audiences. Studies have found that the stronger the parasocial relationship between the viewer and the media figure, the greater influence the figure has (Harff, D. 2022). In fact, a strong indicator for a parasocial relationship is the perceived trustworthiness of the figure, which can lead the viewer to trust their opinion on matters outside of their typical sphere of influence – such as politics (Harff, D. 2022). Indeed, transparency and authenticity are seen as defining characteristics for successful influencers (Balaban, D. C., & Szambolics, J. 2022). This is likely due, at least in part, to the perceived realism or personal nature of the social media sites – the content is presented as though it came straight from the media figure themselves (Lee, E.-J., & Jang, J. 2013).

FANDOM AND ONLINE FAN CULTURE

In addition to a desire for authenticity, many social media users are searching for a sense of community and often find it amongst other online fandoms. Fan communities

form online through communication and sharing of information and knowledge (Riddick 2022). Fuschillo (2020) argues that fandoms are an expression of our consumer-based and brand-obsessed society. According to Bliss (2022), fandom communities can grow so strong as to form their own metaculture. These communities are often built up of many individuals with parasocial relationships to the same media figure. Fans interact with each other in these online spaces, sharing marketing material as well as creating their own fan content (see Rush, 2021). Further, Brown, Billings, Murphy, and Puesan (2018) found that fans can be drawn from one media to another once their fandom has been established.

CURRENT MEDIA LANDSCAPE

It seems necessary to take a moment and acknowledge why there may be a trend towards nostalgia and escapism to be found in user's social media habits within the last few years. The phenomenon of fictional characters on social media has truly taken off in the pandemic and newly post-pandemic world we now live in. Studies have shown that loneliness and lack of real-life social interaction were motivating factors for social media use during the COVID-19 pandemic (Langstedt & Hunt, 2022, Quaedvlieg and Pankowska 2023). Specifically, Quaedvlieg and Pankowska found that users who primarily used Instagram to satisfy their social needs, or the need for belonging, had lower self-esteem. What's more, Xu and Jin (2020) found that subjects that were socially excluded were more likely to choose a nostalgic product. In 2021 Buchanan, Akinin, Lotun, Sandstrom concluded that even a few minutes of exposure to positive social media content (acts of kindness) can minimize negative reactions to bad news stories. In combination, these studies seem to suggest that users in isolation, which accounts for a large population of

people during the COVID-19 pandemic, were more likely to seek the interaction that they were lacking by using social media. Those same people would also likely have been drawn to nostalgic content that attempted to bolster user's self-esteem.

FICTIONAL CHARACTERS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

It seems that very little research exists regarding social media accounts that portray fictional characters. One study that gets very close was published by Gauthier in 2018. In this article, Gauthier discusses how “unofficial” accounts – that is, social media profiles for fictional characters that are run by fans – allow enthusiasts to both interact with their favorite fictional character and the fan community that is associated with it. The article posits that by integrating fictional elements into the user's daily reality (i.e. their social media feed), a new set of boundaries between fiction and reality form. The presence of characters on social media allows for new avenues of parasocial relational growth between users and the character, as many accounts reveal more details of the personal lives of the characters or allow the characters to comment on various aspects of pop culture or current events. The accounts use their platforms like real people do, which lends an air of authenticity to a fictional character that goes far beyond what is possible in the original source material.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper aims to research how Sesame Street social media posts have found such great success in appealing to their audiences. As such, a few research questions have been developed.

In order to create a feeling that the world their characters inhabit, i.e. Sesame Street itself, is a real place, the Sesame Workshop social media team utilizes several strategies. This research aims to determine the frequency in which these strategies seem to occur.

R1: How frequently do Sesame Street social media posts feature other Sesame Street characters?

R2: How often do Sesame Street social media posts utilize captions that engage the viewer directly?

R3: How often do Sesame Street social media posts include timely references to pop culture or current events?

R4: What other patterns may be present in these posts?

METHOD

The method utilized for this paper was a content analysis of social media posts. For this analysis, the researcher focused on the @Elmo account on Instagram. Although Sesame Street runs multiple accounts, @Elmo was chosen because it is the largest of the profiles devoted to a single character, with 876,000 followers as of this writing.

The researcher analyzed all permanent, in feed posts that were shared by the @Elmo Instagram account over a six-month period stretching from May 20, 2024 to November 20, 2024. The total number of posts within this window was 123.

The unit of analysis was one complete Instagram post, including both the media element (photo and/or video) and corresponding captions. Any comments, either by audience members or the @Elmo account itself were not included. Additionally, due to their temporary nature, Instagram stories were also not included; but it should be noted

that @Elmo does frequently share story posts. That they cannot be analyzed after the fact is a limitation of this research.

To attempt to make this research as objective as possible, these social media posts were coded across ten categories: each one being coded as present or not present. The categories were as follows:

Caption features at @Elmo speaking directly to the reader. This was primarily determined by the use of the word “you” in reference to the audience.

Post contains a pop culture or current event reference. This category did include allusions to current holidays or seasons, as well as references to social media trends or pop culture news.

Post contains a celebrity appearance. For the purposes of this analysis, “celebrity” was defined as a person who is well known outside of the Sesame Street world. Examples included influencers, actors, singers, and athletes.

Post contained a call to action. This was defined as directing the reader to watch, visit, or engage with specific content outside of Instagram, such as visiting a website.

Post features other Sesame Street characters. This was defined as containing visual representation of any character within the Sesame Street world, including human actors, other muppets, and rocks.

Captions include emoji. This included any emoji present in the caption of the post itself.

Post contained multiple photos. This applied to any single post that contained a carousel of multiple photos and/or videos.

Post was a video. This included both videos shared to the feed and Instagram Reels.

Post was a collaboration. Post collaborations are a feature that allows one post to be shared on multiple Instagram profiles at once. This means that collaboration posts appear on the @Elmo feed but may have been posted by another account.

Post was shared from other social media accounts. This account occasionally shares photos that are composed of screenshots from @Elmo posts on X (Twitter).

Although Instagram does have a web browser, these posts were viewed on an iPhone through the Instagram mobile app. Each category was assessed and coded as present or not present for each individual post. For reference, the case number (1-123) and date of the post was also documented. The data was entered into Microsoft Excel to be documented and analyzed.

RESULTS

The findings of this analysis showed some patterns in the content shared by the @Elmo Instagram page. The following table demonstrates the number of posts that contained each category, the number that did not contain it, and the percentage of cases that contained the item rounded to the nearest tenth.

VARIABLE	PRESENT	NOT PRESENT	PERCENTAGE
Elmo speaks directly to the reader	33	89	27.6%
Pop culture or current event reference	63	59	51.2%

Celebrity appearance	41	81	33.3%
Call to action	5	117	4.1%
Other Sesame Street characters	58	64	48.0%
Emoji	98	24	80.5%
Multiple photos	19	103	16.2%
Video	41	81	33.3%
Collaboration	36	86	30.1%
Shared from other social media	15	107	12.2%

COLLABORATION AND CROSS-PROMOTION

To address research question 1: How frequently do Sesame Street social media posts feature other Sesame Street characters? We can see that nearly half of all the posts on @Elmo do contain other Sesame Street characters. On a related note, one third of posts feature a celebrity appearance and 30% of posts are collaborations.

Additionally, these numbers represent a strategy being utilized by the Sesame Street social media team to cross-promote their characters across various profiles. Many of the collaboration posts counted in this analysis were from other Sesame Street profiles. Others were shared during NBC's coverage of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, in which Elmo acted as a special correspondent and posted many collaborations with NBC accounts and the athletes featured in the posts and may have given @Elmo's posts a wider audience.

ENGAGING THE VIEWER

This research also shows that many of the captions written for this account are attempting to engage with the audience directly. In roughly 27% of captions, @Elmo

addresses the reader. This behavior would be considered the first order of parasocial interaction; meaning the character is speaking to the audience directly. Additionally, @Elmo utilizes emoji in over 80% of captions. Emoji can express emotion and add additional personality to the text.

POP CULTURE AND CURRENT EVENTS

The third research question asks how often these social media posts reference pop culture or current events. This analysis found that more than half of the posts shared by @Elmo contained references to current events or pop culture. One important limitation to note regarding this category, however, is that there may have been references that the researcher did not understand – thus is the nature of pop culture. However, it remains clear that these references make up a large percentage of the posts shared by this Instagram profile.

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

Other findings to note involve the nature of the posts themselves. Only five individual posts, representing 4.1% of the sample, included a call to action. Additionally, this research provided insight on post formats. One third of posts contained videos. Of the two-thirds remaining that were still photographs, around 16% contained multiple photos or a carousel.

DISCUSSION

This analysis gives some insight into the strategies being utilized by the Sesame Street social media team to create a successful Instagram profile for Elmo, and by extension, their other characters. It is clear that they have made a choice to cross-promote

their other character profiles, as well as promoting collaborations between Elmo and other media outlets, such as NBC and various celebrities and influencers. These numbers correspond to the idea that this profile is presenting Elmo as if he were a real person; meaning that he is showcasing his friends on his Instagram feed much like the average user would. This may also explain the lack of calls to action present in these posts. Their purpose seems to lean more towards fan engagement on the social networks themselves than to drive clicks to other content.

Overall, the results show that there is an emphasis on directly engaging the audience through personal captions and relevant pop culture references, collaborations with both Sesame Street characters and other well-known profiles, and consistency of voice for the character of Elmo. These choices are consistent with the themes and theories discussed earlier in this paper and may lead to a stronger relationship between the brand and their audience.

LIMITATIONS

There are many limitations present in this study. As it is a student paper, there were constraints on time and budget that may not have been present on a larger study.

Therefore, it is important to note the lack of intercoder reliability given that there was only one researcher available to code. The sample chosen was also not as representative as a larger sample may have been. The choice to only analyze one of the many social media accounts operated by the Sesame Street team may reduce the ability to generalize these findings to the other profiles. Additionally, the limited time frame of the sample did include

a special campaign, the 2024 Olympics, which influenced the type and frequency of posts that were shared during that event.

The nature of a content analysis presents limitations on the conclusions that can be drawn regarding the effects of the media consumed. Further research is needed to understand audience reactions, engagement, and behavior in relation to these social media accounts. This paper alone is not sufficient in proving the presence or cause of the formation of parasocial relationships between Sesame Street characters and their audiences.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Sesame Street has crafted a social media strategy that contains multiple elements that, when combined, lead to a number of successful posts and profiles for their characters. This content analysis aimed to shed a light on what that strategy consists of so that we may learn from it. By crafting these social media posts in a way that harnesses the voice of their characters, Sesame Street's team has harnessed the power of their audience's nostalgia and parasocial relationships to their characters. Many other businesses and brands could learn from this strategy and embrace the idea of relationship building over sales, clicks, or engagement.

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