

Analysis of Viral Communication Characteristics in Social Media Platforms: Taking KFC's 'Crazy Thursday' Marketing Videos on Chinese Video-sharing Platform Bilibili.com as an Example

Zhenglang Wang

Journalism and Media Study Centre, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, 999077, China

*Corresponding author's e-mail: leonwzl121@gmail.com

Abstract

The article mainly adopts the case study approach with a specific focus on the 'Crazy Thursday' marketing campaign conducted by the fast-food brand KFC, which gained significant popularity on various Chinese social media platforms by the end of 2021. This study analyses the viral communication phenomenon of the 'Crazy Thursday' related video content on Bilibili.com, one of the most popular video-sharing platforms on the Chinese Internet. It also examines new features of "viral marketing" within the context of participatory Internet from the perspective of communication strategies and highlights several significant factors that require attention in implementing viral marketing, aiming to offer guidelines to advertising researchers.

Keywords

Communication Studies; Viral Communication; Viral Marketing; Marketing Strategies; Social Media; Chinese Internet; Marketing Studies; Advertising Studies; KFC.

1. Introduction

"My company fired me, I didn't want to work, my work performance was terrible, my co-workers didn't like me, and my friends didn't care about me. Now I'm living under a bridge, and it's freezing outside; I don't have a blanket; I haven't eaten today; I haven't taken my medication; I'm feeling dizzy and haven't even had a sip of hot water. My computer is also dying, and I accidentally clicked on the calendar, and speaking of calendars, today is 'Crazy Thursday', please transfer me 50 yuan (to buy KFC)."

At the beginning of May 2021, a trend emerged on major Chinese social media platforms wherein internet jokes featuring similar frameworks but different forms, such as the above, gained increasing popularity. This type of text-style joke, largely based on 'Crazy Thursday', a special sales promotion activity launched by the fast-food brand KFC, is also known as 'Crazy Thursday (referred to as 'CT') Literature'. The beginnings of those jokes are either short tales of suspense or touching emotional stories, and some are even family ethical dramas with absurd plots, which can be described as varied and intriguing. However, its endings will always be unexpected, turning back to, "Today is KFC's 'Crazy Thursday', can someone please transfer me 50 yuan?" Due to the unique reversals at the endings of 'CT Literature', which is often unexpected, combined with its easy-to-disseminate characteristics of media attributes and a high degree of participation, it soon showed a trend of 'viral communication' the Chinese Internet. In particular, Chinese netizens have also mixed various social issues and celebrity gossip in the process of dissemination, which makes 'Crazy Thursday' seem to have a longer life cycle compared to other Internet buzzwords and is no longer regarded as a single form of boring marketing campaigns, and was once considered as one of the most popular buzzwords on Chinese Internet in the past two years. This article aims to sort out and reveal the

dissemination process, characteristics and strategies of KFC's 'Crazy Thursday'. In order to accomplish this goal, the concept of 'viral communication' and related theories are introduced.

2. The Definition and Characteristics of Viral Communication

The term 'viral communication' is frequently utilised in communication studies and marketing studies, it refers to a prevalent communication phenomenon observed in contemporary societies. At present, there is a lack of a universally accepted and standardised definition for the concept of 'viral communication' within both Chinese and international academic domains. The majority of scholars commonly define the concept through analogy with the viral communication model employed in biology studies. For instance, German scholar Carl B. Welker defines viral communication as "strategies that allow an easier, accelerated, and cost-reduced transmission of messages by creating environments for a self-replicating, exponentially increasing diffusion, spiritualisation, and impact of the message" [1]. Based on that, Chinese scholar Liu Wenyong has emphasised the subjectivity of audience, defining viral communication as "enabling the audience to benefit from participating in the process of information production and dissemination, so that the recipient becomes the publisher of the information at the same time." [2] Dong Xiangyang, on the other hand, defines viral communication concerning the media properties and characteristics of social media platforms such as Weibo as "an information dissemination approach in which people with similar information acquisition and sharing needs based on each other's relationship networks to achieve rapid replication, flow and dissemination of information." [3] According to Dong Xiangyang's analysis, viral communication usually demonstrates four fundamental characteristics: First, the "pathogen" nature, which refers to a source of information in the communication process that is attractive, resulting in the audience's transition from passive recipients of information to active participants in communication. Second, the high-speed nature of the dissemination rate; the audience of viral communication actively takes the initiative to consciously propagate the information, resulting in a dissemination mode that exhibits a geometric multiplication of the dissemination rate. Third, the active reception of information by the audience combined with the privatisation of the communication medium, which contributes to a high acceptance rate of viral communication. Finally, the medium of viral communication is frequently characterised by its ease of replication and redistribution, as well as its low dissemination costs [3].

The 'Crazy Thursday' campaign launched by KFC, which has received significant attention on prominent Chinese social media platforms over the past two years, has been recognised as a representative case of viral marketing. This paper focuses on the phenomenon of 'viral communication' of its related popular video content on Bilibili.com, one of the most popular video-sharing platforms on the Chinese Internet. It also intends to analyse the characteristics of communication on social media platforms from the perspective of communication studies, with the aim of providing scholars and professionals in the related fields with rough references in both the academic and practical senses.

3. The Dissemination Process and Characteristics of the 'Crazy Thursday' Viral Communication

3.1. The Dissemination Process of 'Crazy Thursday'

According to the data report of KFC's official Weibo account, the 'Crazy Thursday' special sales promotion activity began in mid-August 2018 at the earliest. In the initial stages of the activity, most of the products promoted were chicken nuggets, fries and burgers priced at 9.90 yuan, with the slogan "Crazy Thursdays, 9.9 yuan for everything". Meanwhile, KFC officials had also

invited famous pop stars such as Lu Han and Wang Yuan to shoot promotional advertisements for the activity and focused on placing ads on the lifts and express cabinet areas in various residential communities nationwide. However, due to the substandard quality of the advert promotion music and the excessive amount of advertising, its effect on the public was not remarkable and even received dissatisfaction from certain consumers [4]. This situation changed in May 2021, when the first generation of 'CT literature', such as the abovementioned joke, gradually emerged on the Chinese Internet. On 31st December 2021, in its official capacity, KFC's Weibo account played the 'memes' itself by hosting a live stream of 'CT Literature', displaying netizens' written content, with the aim of creating momentum for the dissemination of 'Crazy Thursday'.

3.2. The Analysis of Viral Communication and Marketing Strategies of the "Crazy Thursday"

There is an absence of theories on the elements of viral communication strategies in the existing literature. This paper mainly employs the theoretical framework of viral marketing proposed by American scholar Ralph F. Wilson to analyse the factors of the viral communication strategy of the 'Crazy Thursday' campaign in the context of social media platforms. According to Wilson, an effective viral marketing strategy should contain six fundamental elements: 1. Gives away valuable products or services; 2. Provides for effortless transfer to others; 3. Scales easily from small to very large; 4. Exploits common motivations and behaviors; 5. Utilises existing communication networks; 6. Takes advantage of other resources [5]. Moreover, the more elements a marketing strategy contains, the more effective it is. For this paper, 'Crazy Thursday' will be used as the search keyword. The most clicks and most Danmakus in the videos on Bilibili.com will be used as the reference standard to select the top 10 videos, and use Ralph's theoretical framework of the six elements of effective viral marketing to analyse the characteristics of the viral communication of 'Crazy Thursday' (See Table 1).

Table 1. Basic Information of Top Ten Videos related with 'Crazy Thursday' on the Bilibili.com

Video uploader	Published Date	Views(by 2022/08/09)	Duration(m in)	Video Theme	Danmaku Interactions (by 2022/08/09)	Likes	Coins	Favorites	Sharings	Comments
Hardcore Banfo	2022/2/17	139.4 million	13:01	Knowledge&Education	3681	6.7mil	5301	5493	5251	1711
Ganggang	2022/4/9	112.7 million	5:01	Food Reviews	1298	1.7mil	1171	1869	4345	941
Meme Guide	2022/3/10	105.7 million	2:08	Knowledge&Education	365	7.6mil	2840	5277	4548	1227
Baideng	2022/3/26	103.5 million	0:54	Entertainment	629	4.5mil	1mil	1.1 mil	3.4 mil	1007
Chengxu blender	2022/4/7	90.0 million	3:50	Entertainment	609	5.5mil	5353	1.7 mil	7564	488
Rice Bake	2022/5/30	84.5 million	6:30	Food Reviews	2296	2.7mil	5475	1688	2258	898
Tanglang Finance	2022/6/14	83.2 million	9:56	Knowledge&Education	1282	6569	536	2088	308	1083
Karasu	2022/7/14	71.4 million	1:34	Entertainment	886	4.3mil	599	2054	1284	574
Dong Jianing	2022/6/23	69.5 million	7:29	Knowledge&Education	1924	5.3mil	7549	5203	3506	1315
OTwilight's End0	2022/7/7	66.8 million	4:16	Food Reviews	470	5333	265	251	3088	1450

3.2.1. Gives Away Valuable Products Or Services

According to the observation from the sample search result, 'Crazy Thursday' related videos can be categorised into two general types: original content and second creation. Original content often refers to creating video content around 'Crazy Thursday' as the primary topic; for example, some of the videos in the sample chose to explain the communication phenomenon of 'Crazy Thursday' or simply review the promoted products from a different perspective. For instance, in the video "Invite a Professional Dessert Chef to Eat KFC Potato Chicken Thigh Cake", the video creator chose to analyse the product from the perspective of a professional baker. In contrast, the second creation videos specifically relate to video content that has incorporated the components of 'Crazy Thursday', such as memes. Using the video titled "[vrchat] Korean Girl" as an example, the main topic of the video has limited connection to the 'Crazy Thursday'. However, the video effectively incorporates memes associated with 'Crazy Thursday', resulting in notable popularity. Original content can mainly provide audiences with a certain degree of valuable information, such as the value and taste of specific promoted products, the principles of communication and economic theories behind the 'Crazy Thursday' activity, as well as some personal experiences. The second creation videos, on the other hand, brings audiences the source of entertainment, utilising memes originating from 'Crazy Thursday' or similar hot topics, strengthening the audience's sense of immersion in watching the video.

3.2.2. Provides for Effortless Transfer to Others

In her analysis of the viral communication of Internet buzzwords, Chinese scholar Liu Min argues that three essential elements are required in order to achieve successful viral communication: the "pathogen", the information sender and the information receiver [6]. In communication studies, a "pathogen" commonly refers to a flexible factor in the information source itself that can contribute to the geometric multiplication spread. For a "pathogen" to spread rapidly in the appropriate environment, the information source must be easy to replicate and transmit. As for the 'Crazy Thursday' related videos, their ease nature of dissemination is reflected in three significant aspects: Firstly, the average duration is short. Most of the ten videos from the sample have a duration of less than 10 minutes, with the shortest one at 54 seconds. Considering that each video in the sample has a different theme and was uploaded into different subsections, an average duration time of less than 10 minutes can be considered short on Bilibili.com. Yao Rong, in his analysis of the viral communication phenomenon of short videos on the Douyin platform (Chinese version of TikTok), argues that short-length videos are more in line with the fast-paced lifestyle of the audience [7]. Meanwhile, platform users habitually use the fragmented time to watch videos, which presents the characteristics of 'Full scene marketing'. As a result, the short duration of the video allows for quicker and faster dissemination of the "pathogen". Secondly, as one of the leading video-sharing websites in China, Bilibili.com has a mature video promotion mechanism, meaning that videos with a higher number of 'coins', 'likes', 'favorites', etc., are more likely to be noticed by the platform and promoted on the platform. Similarly, for the video mentioned above, although its Danmaku interactions and number of comments were relatively poor compared to other 'Crazy Thursday' related videos, its number of likes, favorites and retweets, which ranked first in the sample, enabled it to be seen by more viewers, and eventually ranked fourth among the ten videos (1.035 million) in terms of views. Thirdly, Bilibili.com has a cross-platform sharing function, which gives the 'viral content' a convenient distribution medium, which will be discussed in detail in the following section.

3.2.3. Scales Easily from Small to Very Large

In the contemporary information age, users often tend to use various and multiple social media platforms at the same time. After obtaining valuable information on one platform, it has become a regular habit to use cross-platform sharing functions to share relevant information to other

social media platforms or chat software. Relevant data has shown that the popularity of KFC's 'Crazy Thursday', which went viral, has a distinct time limit. For example, Baidu Index data shows that since 2022, the Search Index (the degree of Internet users' attention to keyword searches) for 'Crazy Thursday' has shown regular peaks on Thursdays. The development trend is increasing, with an overall growth of up to 826 per cent (by 8 August 2022). At the same time, 'Crazy Thursday' continues to be a hot topic on Weibo, with the hashtag #KFCrazyThursday generating a cumulative total of 1.91 billion views and 4.116 million discussions (by 8 August 2022); #CrazyThursday has also hit the Weibo Hot 100 on Thursdays on several occasions. As mentioned above, 'Crazy Thursday' has gone through a relatively long incubation period and a rapid outbreak in the course of its dissemination and is now in the process of long-term development, with 'Crazy Thursday' showing a tendency to spread on a large scale across platforms, confirming that the "pathogen" (i.e., 'Crazy Thursday') has undergone a mutation stage as a result of its sudden outbreak of viral communication.

3.2.4. Exploits Common Motivations and Behaviors

In addition, videos related to 'Crazy Thursday' have been shown to utilise the motivation of the audience, thus achieving a more comprehensive degree of dissemination. As the special sales promotion marketing campaigns launched by one of the most internationally renowned fast-food brands, 'Crazy Thursday' did not gain a lot of attention at the beginning, but it still achieved a certain degree of exposure through KFC's official advertising resources and benefited from the long-term operation, which built up a more profound impression in the minds of the audience and consumers. After its sudden success, it instantly attracted a large number of new consumers through previously advertised slogans and posters as well as various newly emerged Internet jokes, showing that it has reasonably and effectively exploited the curiosity of the new audience during its marketing and dissemination. As the campaign gradually reaches its climax, more and more audiences are interested in the principles of communication and economic knowledge behind the popularity of the activity, which takes advantage of the audience's strong desire for knowledge; some of them even try to study the best way to maximise the benefits of the activity, which takes advantage of the profit-seeking nature of the audience, and thus attracts new consumers.

3.2.5. Utilises Existing Communication Networks

Some scholars have argued that the typical "infector" in viral communication tends to have three main qualities: a strong need to acquire and share information, a spirit of entertainment, and a desire to expand their fame [3]. Taking the example of the successful viral communication of 'Crazy Thursday' on Bilibili.com, it cannot be separated from the promotion mechanism and sharing function of the video platform. Meanwhile, the main user group of the platform is primarily composed of young people who are full of the spirit of entertainment, which is precisely fit for the characteristics of active sharing. This group often chooses to share the content for entertainment or self-presentation when they observe the content they are interested in or think is interesting. Also, according to the famous Six Degrees of Separation theory proposed by Stanley Milgram, an American psychologist, a person can connect with anyone in the world through up to six people [8]. With the development of the modern Internet, this logic has been simplified through only three steps to dissemination: oneself, one's friends and one's friends' friends. Thus, the 'Crazy Thursday' activity took the primary user group of Bilibili.com as the medium of dissemination and made full use of the networks of interpersonal and group communication, thereby achieving effective dissemination.

3.2.6. Takes Advantage of Other Resources

Successful viral communication usually takes advantage of resources provided by others to achieve redistribution effectively. Such as the 'Crazy Thursday' related videos also indirectly resulted from the success of KFC's official marketing. As 'Crazy Thursday' started to gain

increasing popularity in May 2021, KFC organised an official live-streaming event at the end of December 2021, which was the climax of the campaign, to further promote 'Crazy Thursday' to the public. Most of the ten videos in the sample selected for this article were released in the first half year of 2022, and all of them were directly or indirectly influenced by the official KFC marketing. Meanwhile, the video topic selected by famous bloggers(video uploaders) was also influenced by the marketing campaign, including "Hardcore Banfo", a famous financial video blogger, and "Dong Jianing", a famous intellectual. Although these two videos are not intended to promote 'Crazy Thursday actively' but only to discuss the subject, it is undeniable that they have still used their fan base to spread the idea of 'Crazy Thursday' to a certain extent.

4. Conclusion and Reflection

In summary, the marketing and communication phenomenon of 'Crazy Thursday' under the KFC brand can be regarded as a practical case of viral marketing in the past two years, and its success may provide a specific reference value for other advertising practitioners. Nevertheless, there are two specific points that deserve particular consideration. Firstly, videos that related to 'Crazy Thursday' were mainly disseminated on Bilibili.com, and its success has primarily relied upon the platform's promotion mechanism, forwarding function, and the "susceptibility" (willingness to share) of the main user groups. Secondly, in terms of content, the videos related to 'Crazy Thursday' provided audiences with valuable information and sources of entertainment, effectively utilising the various psychological aspects and thus spreading them further. It also utilises the communication network among the existing user base and the fan base of the platform's well-known bloggers. Thirdly, KFC itself is a well-established company with a high degree of market dependence on its products. These three points are that the use of viral marketing needs attention; in other words, the success of viral marketing does need a strategy. It needs to be built based on excellent products, a mature marketing promotion plan, creative ideas, and the complete research and grasp of the basis of the audience's psychology.

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