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The Art of Maximizing Attention: Digital Neoliberalism and MrBeast

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Introduction

The MrBeast YouTube Channel and overarching business have become one of the most recognizable and successful internet-based brands of the 2020s. With over 400 million subscribers, billions of views per month, and a groundbreaking \$100 million deal with Amazon Prime, MrBeast and original creator Jimmy Donaldson showcase what contemporary achievement looks like within the constraints of digital technology affordances and dominant neoliberal logics. Donaldson often explains how his obsessive commitment to understanding audience interests (as mediated through data analytics and algorithmic control) allows him to publish content that by its very nature will achieve the maximum amount of viewership. I explore in depth his explanation as it pertains to the discursive persona of MrBeast.

In the era of prevailing digital media, the mechanics of the global marketplace have transformed to account for the new interactions between users and content creators, while still maintaining an overarching neoliberal economic ideal. In short, a new hegemonic model of value exchange erupts from the emergent attention economy (Lanham 2006) that shapes economic interaction on digital platforms. As economic value becomes more and more associated with the time users spend on a platform interacting with content, economic actors find themselves more focused on the data created from that interaction and the algorithmic forces that encourage increased attention. Data and algorithm analysis allow economic actors to predict and control user attention. From a model of internet revenue based on advertising, this control shapes the value of advertisement through the lens of how long an individual user pays attention (Heitmayer 2024). For the digital neoliberal, the rational action of all internet creators, therefore, should be to maximize that attention.

In this paper, I explore the intersection of MrBeast's content and contemporary digital neoliberal economic rationality. Through the persona rhetorically constructed from main channel content and interviews with Donaldson, I find symmetry between that discursively presented persona and the logic of digital neoliberalism as understood through the attention economy. This symmetry suggests a broader embodiment of this

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specific economic rationality as core to the brand persona itself. Ultimately, I argue that the MrBeast/Donaldson digital brand embodies the maximization of the attention economy.

Theory and Literature Review

This analysis requires interacting economic and rhetorical theoretical frameworks to guide interpretation. I build from Harvey's (2005) definition of neoliberalism, which focuses on advancing human well-being through individual, entrepreneurial principles within a free trade and markets framework. Recognizing the dominant market rationality in contemporary thought, I apply Fisher's (2009) characterization of business ontology and Foucault's ([1979] 2008) *homo economicus* to illuminate the underlying structural pressures that encourage individual actors to run their own lives as businesses, oriented towards maximizing profit over all other ends.

Turning to the digital environment, Pfister and Yang (2018) describe the intensification of neoliberal logics within digital spaces as technoliberalism. Incorporating Berry (2019) and Lanham (2006), this digital instantiation of neoliberalism prioritizes the internet's monetary structures of data collection and attention maximization as an alternative capital. These structures then create an attention economy that neoliberal logics bolster to prioritize maximizing viewership on content from small, individual creators to large corporations. I seek to locate where this logic appears in the discursive MrBeast persona.

Lastly, Ware and Linkugel's (1982) description of the rhetorical persona and McGee's (1990) fragmentation theory inform how I interpret the MrBeast persona. Through content fragments that speak in conversation with each other, the persona emerges as a discursive identity inseparable from the rhetor, in this case, MrBeast/Donaldson. This identity emerges from interwoven discursive elements that the audience experiences in an overlapping nature to build an experience of a persona that the audience can connect to the very ethos of the rhetor. In the digital environment, Eyman's (2015) description of a digital ecology reflects this complex interweb of fragments. As content shifts in form and function within and across platforms, an ecology emerges that describes the larger audience experience of individual content creators. Because MrBeast content extends across major platforms and various formats, the audience experiences an ecology of persona. This understanding shapes the methodology I utilize to investigate the MrBeast persona.

Methods

For this paper, I utilize a close textual analysis grounded in rhetorical analysis to provide a reading of the text that is shared by a broader audience and defensible through criticism and argumentation (Brockriede 1974, Brummett 2009). The texts consist of a representative subset of the MrBeast main channel long-form YouTube Videos and various off-channel interviews featuring Donaldson concerning the MrBeast company and content. While the YouTube videos and most interviews contain visual content, I focus primarily on the transcripts and include references to visual examples to showcase the content choices described by Donaldson and others in conversation.

Through Black's (1965) understanding of rhetorical criticism as a study of rhetorical discourses, I am able to build a discursively constructed persona that is experienced by users through the fragmented digital ecology of MrBeast content based on the aforementioned theory.

Analysis and Discussion

From the methods and theory provided, I argue that data analytics functions as both a tool for the neoliberal achievement of MrBeast and, importantly, as a key component of the discursive persona presented in the channel content and Donaldson interviews. The merger of Donaldson/MrBeast into a unified brand image, both through vernacular reference and purposeful creative inclusion (seen in Donaldson's face plastered across every piece of content), allows for Donaldson, his story, and his economic decisions to be incorporated into this analysis of the brand. Taken as a unified persona, the strength of the neoliberal logics manifests in the frequent reference to Donaldson's primary goal of maximizing attention. This emerges in many different discursive forms, including using 10-second introductions based on user retention averages, utilizing specific topics and themes in content to entice the maximum amount of viewers, and even building and selling YouTube data analytic tools for other content creators (ViewStats Pro). These references fundamentally value capturing the weights of the algorithm that shapes user interaction and constructing content that exactly mimics the audience's interests as communicated through their data imprint. The discursive brand is therefore not merely the content on the channel but critically the rhetorical understanding of MrBeast as a fundamentally attention-driven business. This persona values not the output of an artist, not the merchandise of a business, but the sole maximization of attention. Ultimately, I argue that MrBeast's massive success within the attention economy is validation for digital neoliberal logics as the frame by which success can be both understood and achieved.

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