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Narrative Logic and Communication Effects of MrBeast's YouTube Videos: A Case Study of Long-Form Videos and Shorts

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Abstract. Short-video platforms shape how stories are told and how far they travel. This working paper studies the narrative logic of MrBeast's YouTube videos, both long-form videos and Shorts, and asks how that logic may relate to reach and interaction. Using a qualitative case study based on published research and documented public cases, it identifies a stable narrative pattern: a clear challenge and prize at the opening, rising stakes in the middle, and an explicit reveal at the end. Long-form videos build this pattern through several stages, while Shorts compress it into a single peak. The analysis links the pattern to the attention logic of the platform and to research on high-arousal emotion and sharing, and it points to weaknesses of the model, including templated stories, thin portrayal of participants, and light interaction. From this analysis the paper derives three propositions, and it sets out a coding scheme and an analysis plan for testing them on a sampling frame of 240 videos published between January 2023 and August 2026. The paper does not report statistical tests, and its claims should be read as propositions rather than confirmed effects. It also discusses cross-cultural reception and the role of AIGC, and it argues that AIGC can raise production efficiency but cannot replace real content and audience trust.

Keywords: short video, narrative logic, communication effect, content analysis, YouTube

1. Introduction

Short-video platforms have changed how stories are made, recommended, and watched. On YouTube, creators now publish long-form videos and Shorts side by side, and their choices about structure, length, and emotion are closely tied to how the platform counts attention and recommends content. This makes narrative design a useful entry point for understanding why some videos travel much further than others.

MrBeast, whose real name is Jimmy Donaldson, is a suitable case for this question. He is one of the individual creators with the most subscribers in the world, his content is produced in a highly industrialized way, and he works in both long-form videos and Shorts. His videos are built around challenges, large prizes, and clear outcomes, and they have drawn the attention of researchers interested in platform logic, audience participation, and charity content. This paper asks how the

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narrative structure of his videos may relate to reach and interaction, and how long-form videos differ from Shorts in this respect.

2. Literature review

Research on the communication effects of short videos must consider the interaction among platforms, creators, and audiences. Burgess and Green [1] treat YouTube as a typical site of participatory culture, where viewers are not passive receivers but help spread content through comments, sharing, and remixing. Jenkins et al. [2] introduce the idea of "spreadability", arguing that whether content travels widely depends on whether audiences are willing to share and discuss it. Page [3] shows that stories shared on social media perform identity work for their tellers as they interact with their audiences. Van Dijck [4] adds that the way a platform connects users and designs its recommendation system shapes how content travels and how visible it becomes. Together, these studies help explain how a creator's videos can spread widely through platform mechanisms and audience participation.

Platformization and creator production have become a major focus in recent years. Cunningham and Craig [5] use the term "social media entertainment" for content creation that relies on platforms and earns money through advertising shares and brand deals. A small but growing body of work looks directly at MrBeast. Rabon [6] analyzes the main channel's long-form videos and interviews with Jimmy Donaldson, and argues that his online persona reflects the logic of the attention economy under digital neoliberalism, with the channel's content built around gaining and holding user attention. Miller and Hogg [7] focus on his philanthropic videos. They report that he earned about $54 million in 2021, roughly the same as the ten top-earning YouTubers of 2015 combined, and they show how large giveaways attract larger audiences and more advertising and sponsorship income, which then pays for even larger giveaways. In their account, Donaldson himself names click-through rate and viewer retention as the key factors in being recommended, which explains his heavy investment in thumbnails, titles, and challenge-style formats. This paper therefore proposes an analytical framework and a set of testable propositions. It asks two questions. RQ1: What narrative structure do MrBeast's long-form videos and Shorts use? RQ2: How might this structure relate to indicators of reach and interaction? Cross-cultural reception, which is often raised in discussions of global creators, is treated as an open issue in Section 5, because the public data needed to study it are not available in this study.

3. Research design

3.1. Approach

This paper combines a qualitative case study with a protocol for content analysis. The case study examines MrBeast's content production logic and platform strategies, using published research and publicly documented cases. MrBeast was chosen for three reasons: he is one of the individual creators with the most subscribers in the world; his content production is highly industrialized; and he works across both long-form videos and Shorts, so he can show well the content strategies of top creators in a platform algorithm environment. The content analysis protocol in Sections 3.2 and 3.3 defines how the propositions derived in Section 4 are to be tested. The analysis in Section 4 therefore rests on published and documented evidence, some of which predates the sampling period, and it is labeled as such.

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3.2. Sampling frame

The sampling frame covers videos publicly released by MrBeast on YouTube, on both the main channel and the short-video channel, from January 1, 2023 to August 31, 2026. Videos were selected through criteria-based screening rather than random sampling. The criteria are as follows. First, the content must be original to MrBeast or produced with his deep involvement, excluding pure reposts, re-edits, fan-made content, and unrelated behind-the-scenes clips. Second, the public data of the video must be complete, so that views, likes, and comments can be obtained. Third, when the same video is posted on several platforms, only the YouTube version is kept, and pure trailers, duplicate posts, and videos with abnormal data are excluded. The initial search and screening returned 400 related videos. After each video was checked for relevance, originality, and data completeness, 160 were removed, and 240 valid videos remained.

3.3. Coding scheme and analysis plan

Narrative variables are coded from the video itself, and outcome indicators are taken from the public page of each video. Because view counts are strongly skewed, medians and interquartile ranges are to be reported instead of means, separately for long-form videos and Shorts. Differences between groups are to be tested with the Mann–Whitney U test, and associations between ordinal or numeric variables with Spearman's rank correlation. To check reliability, a second coder is to code a random subset of 20 to 30 percent of the videos independently, disagreements are to be resolved by discussion with a third coder.

4. Findings from documented evidence

4.1. Finding 1: the videos follow a stable pattern of opening promise, escalation, and reveal

The documented cases point to one pattern that can be summarized in three steps. The opening promise states the task, the rule, and the prize at the outset. Miller and Hogg document this in titles from 2019, such as "Last to leave revolving door wins $50,000" and "Last to stop swinging wins $1,000,000", each of which gives all three in one line. Escalation follows: the stakes are raised through higher prizes, harder conditions, countdowns, eliminations, and reversals. The scale can be large. A 25-minute video recreating the contests of the series Squid Game cost more than $3.5 million to produce and awarded $462,000 to the winner. The reveal closes the video by announcing who won and how much. Together, the steps work as a promise and its fulfillment, and Miller and Hogg describe the result as a formula that proved to work well on YouTube. In coding terms, each step maps onto a coded variable: the opening promise, the number of escalation stages, and the reveal.

The pattern rests on a different logic from other well-known creator formats. Li et al. [8] describe the China Travel live streams of another creator, IShowSpeed, as unedited and unscripted, with more than 50 hours of live broadcasting across eight cities. The pattern described here is instead stated at the opening and repeated from video to video.

Proposition 1 (P1). In the sampling frame, most videos state the task, the rule, and the prize or stakes in the opening, and long-form videos contain more escalation stages than Shorts.

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4.2. Finding 2: the pattern fits the attention logic of the platform and is linked to very large reach

If the pattern fits the attention logic of the platform, it should be related to reach. Documented cases show how large that reach can be. The Squid Game video reached 212 million views by February 1, 2022, about two months after its release on November 24, 2021, and the earlier video "Giving a random homeless man $10,000" passed nine million views. These figures are single cases from earlier years. They show what is possible on the platform, not what is typical in the sampling frame.

Platform research explains why reach and design are linked. Van Es [9] shows that "the view" is the basic unit by which YouTube counts audiences and rewards creators, and Nieborg and Poell [10] argue that platformization makes creators dependent on algorithmic logic. García-Rapp [11] adds that platform data feed back into creators' choices about topics and expression. In this environment, Miller and Hogg report that Donaldson himself names click-through rate and viewer retention as the key factors in being recommended, which explains the investment in thumbnails, titles, and challenge formats. They also describe a loop in which large audiences bring advertising and sponsorship income, income pays for larger stakes, and larger stakes draw larger audiences.

Proposition 2 (P2). In the sampling frame, videos with an explicit opening promise and high-arousal emotion show higher view counts and higher like rates than videos without them.

Two cautions apply. First, public data do not include watch time or completion rate, so any relation found would be an association, not a cause. Second, the channel already has a very large subscriber base; Miller and Hogg note that he was the world's most subscribed YouTuber by 2022. It is difficult to separate the effect of narrative from the effect of the account's existing audience, and any test should account for it, for example by comparing videos within the same channel and period.

4.3. Finding 3: interaction is designed into the content, but it stays light

Interaction in MrBeast's videos is designed into the content. In "If you press this, I'll pay," he promised to donate ten cents to charity for each new subscriber during 2021, and when three million people subscribed in one month, the promise became a $300,000 giveaway. On his charity channel, viewers are told that watching helps people in need. By November 2022 the channel had 10 million subscribers and 17 videos with 140 million views in total, or about eight million views per video. In 2019, when the main channel reached 20 million subscribers, fans challenged him to plant 20 million trees, and he became the public face of "Team Trees", pledging one tree for every dollar donated. In each case the audience's main actions are simple: subscribing, watching, and donating.

This design links to participatory culture and to the argument that content spreads when audiences are willing to take part. But the participation is guided by the creator's design and limited to a few actions, so it is closer to guided participation than to open conversation. Because the money given away comes largely from advertising and sponsorship tied to viewers' attention, the audience is at once a participant and a source of funds. Nickel and Eikenberry [12] argue that entertainment formats in charity can encourage a passive audience to feel that it is supporting poverty relief.

Proposition 3 (P3). In the sampling frame, Shorts show higher like rates and lower comment rates than long-form videos.

4.4. Finding 4: wide reach does not guarantee acceptance, and the pattern has weaknesses

For MrBeast, three related concerns follow. The first is charity content. Miller and Hogg note that content built for algorithmic circulation tends to show only certain "deserving" beneficiaries and

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presents market logic as the answer to social problems. Such content also joins two things that draw attention easily, large sums of money and emotional stories, which raises questions about how the people who are helped are shown. The second is economic. Miller and Hogg explain that YouTube partners typically receive 55 percent of the advertising revenue earned around their content, and that a creator usually earns about $3 to $5 per thousand video views, with views from developing countries worth less. Viewers from poorer regions therefore add to the audience that produces revenue, yet they may also be the people shown as recipients of help. The third is cultural reading. Narratives built around big prizes and winner-takes-all may be read as motivating in some places and as a display of wealth in others. This is an inference that the present study cannot test.

5. Conclusion and discussion

5.1. Discussion of the propositions

None of the three propositions can be confirmed here, because the sampling frame is not analyzed in this paper. What can be said is how much support each one has from earlier work. P1, on the opening promise and the difference between long-form videos and Shorts, has the strongest support, because the pattern is well documented for earlier years. Whether it still holds in 2023–2026, and how the two formats differ, is a matter for coding. P2, on opening promise, high-arousal emotion, and reach, is consistent with research on emotion and sharing [13, 14] and with documented reach, but it is exposed to a strong confounder, the size of the existing audience. P3, on likes and comments in Shorts, has the weakest support, because it rests on one short student abstract from another domain [15].

5.2. Practical implications

Four suggestions follow. First, for creators, the useful lesson is the method, not the size of the prize: state the task and the stakes at the opening, give each part something new, and end with a clear result. Creators should avoid copying the template, because templating grows when many creators use the same structure. Second, for charity content, people who are helped should be shown as more than props, their own voices should be included where possible, and it should be clear who pays for what. Third, AIGC should be treated as an efficiency tool. Because the pattern is highly structured, it is easy to automate: AIGC can help draft scripts, plan shots, generate subtitles and multilingual dubbing, and test titles and thumbnails, which may also widen reach across languages. But the same structure makes it easy to produce content that looks alike, and the features AIGC cannot supply, namely real participants, real processes, and real outcomes, are the ones that answer thin portrayal and shallow engagement. AI-generated content should be labeled according to platform rules, and content involving real people or real charity needs particular care. Fourth, platforms should look beyond attention indicators, because views and likes reward speed and clarity but do not show whether viewers felt informed or respected.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This paper has clear limits. First, it does not report results for the sampling frame, so its propositions are untested. Second, much of the evidence predates the sampling period, and one source, Miller and Hogg , is used repeatedly, so the analysis is best read as background and framework. Third, the study covers one creator, so the results cannot be generalized. Fourth, public data lack watch time,

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completion rate, and audience region, and no viewer survey was conducted, so any result would show association and not cause. Future work should code the sampling frame with the coding scheme in Section 3.3, report Cohen's kappa on a double-coded subset, and test P1 to P3 with medians, Mann–Whitney U tests, and Spearman correlations, separately for long-form videos and Shorts. Comments could be analyzed by language and topic to study reception, and surveys or interviews could show how viewers experience the videos. Comparison accounts, and AIGC-generated videos as a comparison group, would show whether the pattern is specific to one creator. A further step is to follow the same creator over time, to see whether the template changes when platform rules change. In sum, MrBeast's videos show how a creator can build a repeatable narrative around the attention logic of a platform. The pattern is clear and strong on reach, but it is weak on depth and open on cross-cultural acceptance. Whether it works as described is now a question for the data.

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