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RESEARCH NOTE

The adaptive leadership of social media influencers related to Covid-19

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Abstract

Purpose: Social media brings the whole of the world right into our lives and devices. Sharing common experiences helps normalize our feelings of confusion and a loss of control especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Methods: This conceptual paper uses content analysis to explore two YouTube influencers, Randy Rainbow and Chris Mann, in how they produce content and provide adaptive leadership to the general public through hope and resilience.

Results: Social media influencers have emerged as adaptive leaders and have provided humor and levity during the challenging times of COVID-19. Influencers are content creators that entertain, inspire, and inform their followers through social media platforms. This conceptual paper uses content analysis to explore two YouTube influencers, Randy Rainbow and Chris Mann, in how they produce content and provide adaptive leadership to the general public through hope and resilience.

Implications: The social media influencers highlighted personify the adaptive leadership theory of observing from the balcony while interacting on the dance floor. Through the brilliance of their craft these influencers provide clever and entertaining messages of hope with alacrity.

Keywords: adaptive, leadership, hope, resilience, social media

JEL Classification: I21, I28

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1 INTRODUCTION

It is an understatement to say that media outlets worldwide have been inundated with news and information about the coronavirus pandemic since beginning of 2020. Across the globe people have been told to stay home and to create social distance. This retreat into the safety of our homes has created a surreal void for many. Limiting contact with everyone creates a dissonance that disrupts the ways of the human social animal. Weather and natural disasters seem easier to understand and rationalize; we even have emergency drills to practice response. We name natural disasters like the 100-year flood, 100-year fire, or a 5.0 earthquake. However, this pandemic has no real play book for people to follow. The discomfort of the coronavirus, or any historical pandemic,

(MPH Online, 2020) has a more emotional impact and disruption than contracting the illness. Hope and resilience are two characteristics that help people cope with the unprecedented circumstances unknown blueprint to normalcy we face.

Hope for the future with some sense of goals and a brighter outlook coupled with the resilience of the human spirit are how we can survive. Among the pandemonium of pandemic news stories, press conferences, testing locations, treatment protocols, the rising infection rates and death counts there has to be some relief. The human psyche can only withstand so much of the real story and the true facts of the matter. This paper explores how social media influencers have emerged and what we argue, provide adaptive leadership for the masses through humor and levity. Follows are some



examples of how two YouTube influencers have produced content about the coronavirus that adds some levity to the news, politics, and happenings in daily life. We will use the theory of adaptive leadership to describe these influencers as leaders who are helping their followers (the general public) with hope and resilience.

2 CRAVING CONNECTIONS

The repercussions of COVID-19 are creating personal challenges for people dealing with uncertainty, loss of income or jobs, their lives are stalled, and for so many the grief of losing loved ones. One thing to cling to is a sense of hope. Hope theory was developed out of excuses that were given about mistakes (Snyder, 2002). Interestingly, as descriptions of what people do not want to happen emerges, the focus is actually on the thing that people do want to happen, which is the process of hope (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). The basic components of hope are anchors (or goals), pathways (or the path to achievement), and agency (or the motivation to advance). So, hope is a positive state of motivation to achieve goals through directed action (Snyder et al., 1991). Coupling this motivation with a sense of drive and achievement the notion of resilience adds a boomerang effect to the equation. The ability to channel the sense of hope into action one more time, and every time is resilience. The multiple definitions of resilience include relationship to outcomes, perception as a cause or influence, and the level or exposure of risk (Kaplan, 2002). The phenomenology of participants who were able to successfully maneuver life in the face of difficulty are admirable qualities (Richardson, 2002). These emergent traits that are connect to people through action or narrative are perceived to exhibit resilient behavior (Grotberg, 2003; Richardson, 2002). The act of accepting the challenge, mimicking the actions of others and moving to a sense of accomplishment is the vicarious mastery component of self-efficacy.

3 ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

Leaders must creatively face adaptive challenges with an understanding that these situations are difficult, complex, and not easily solved. Adaptive leadership examines the very nature of how the leader perceives and confronts the challenge, and is flexible about navigating to a positive outcome (Heifetz et al., 2009). Adaptive leadership is, “*the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive*” (p. 14). Adaptive leadership focuses on the dynamic behaviors and pressures in situations that are usually hard to identify. Often in adaptive challenges there is a gap between aspirations and reality, just as we are experiencing with COVID-19. It focuses on reality testing of a situation; weighing ones interpretation of the problem and resources to move towards a solution.

This adaptive approach encourages leaders to simultaneously consider two situational perspectives. First “*on the balcony*” refers to engaging reflective thought about what is happening in the situation with the leader removed, as an observer (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 1). Second, the leader is encouraged

to request feedback and openly engage in the situation “*in the practice field*” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 1). Clearly identifying technical (and therefore more easily solvable) from adaptive (inherently more complex, unclear) challenges is a crucial step in implementing change (Heifetz et al., 2009). Framing influencers as adaptive leaders to provide hope during the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic provides a way to explore such influencers and how they engage followers and engage in leadership.

Influencers as leaders

Social media influencers are the creators of content that inspires, entertains, informs, and connects with an audience of subscribers or followers. Influencers have been used in marketing and advertising for years. The Marlboro Man and Santa Claus are some of the earliest of influencers to appear in commercials (Jeffery, 2020). However, traditional marketing methods are losing their effectiveness. Today’s consumers do not want to be sold to, they want connections. Companies use social media and influencers to make these vital connections with consumers. It seems ironic that to earn the label of influencer one needs a following (both cumulative and per application) of between 1,000 to 1,000,000 followers (Mediakix, 2020a). Companies are engaging with individual creators (i.e., Influencers) on social media to connect with the public. There are varying degrees of influencers that rank from celebrity, mega, macro, mid-tier, micro, and nano descriptors (Mediakix, 2020a). The nano influencer (1,000 to 10,000) who posts more frequently, creates a conversation, and are seen as experts generate up to 85% higher engagement than the 100,000 influencers. These influencers are leaders who are providing connection and a way to cope during these challenging times adaptively. “*This direct line of communication empowers influencers to generate social conversations, drive engagement, and ultimately, set trends amongst a receptive and socially savvy audience*” (Mediakix, 2020a). This is a powerful way for influencers to provide hope during these adaptive challenges, two examples we will explore is Randy Rainbow and Chris Mann.

Randy rainbow

Randy Rainbow is an American social media influencer that posted his first piece in 2010; that resulted in 60,000 views the first week. He currently has 463,000 subscribers and as of May 2020 he has 138 videos listed on his YouTube channel (Rainbow, 2020). Since March 2020 his content has pertained to the coronavirus he has five videos starting with his first, The CORONAVIRUS Lament, that has been viewed 1.3M times. The other four all average 2.4M views with his highest marking 5.8M views. Randy Rainbow can go from concept to his first “like” in approximately 20 hours. His creative genius is conceived and produced in his two-bedroom apartment in Queens, NY. Rainbow claims he is not political, nor a news junkie, but he does admit to having CNN constantly on while he works. Rainbow spends about seven hours crafting a short skit, typically with clips from the news shows where he plays the reporter (Ragusa, 2019). Next in the creative process, he uses his endless catalog of lyrics from musicals he has in his head to create a parody song. He shoots everything on a camera and MacBook Air laptops. In total, it

takes him about 10 hours to film, edit, produce and publish to YouTube and his social media accounts. In addition to his YouTube he does live comedy shows, blogs, and performs. Rainbow's formulaic approach is the news show introduction, which transforms into a musical number all the while providing his editorial of the absurdity or the need for information into a video of less than five minutes. His appeal seems to be the quick turnaround of the videos so the points he is talking/singing about are still hot in the news cycle. He provides the audience with a show that people can relate to because it is so timely, funny, and the musical numbers are all common tunes from Broadway. He is able to bring the view "from the balcony" of the news to the "dance floor level" while connecting with his followers. Rainbow sings about both situations from a technical framework that seem to be protocol or precedent, as well as the adaptive challenges. He presents a digestible view of the adaptive challenges that can be discussed by the masses and provide hope along the way.

Chris Mann

Chris Mann is an American social media influencer that came into the public view on the second season of *The Voice* in 2012. He currently has a YouTube following of 191,000 subscribers. This influencer has 188 videos and has produced 11 videos in the last two months. He does parodies of popular songs with an accompanying choreography that is more reminiscent of the classic music videos, with a comedic slant. Mann's first coronavirus creation was *My Corona*, to the tune of *My Sharona* by the Knack (Mann, 2020). Mann stated that he had the idea, filmed, posted the video, and then actually forgot about it (Jeffery, 2020). It blew up on the internet with 1M views in four days, it now has 6.9M views. Another example of Mann's brilliance is his video, *Hello*, a parody of the Adele song, which has the most views with 12M. Each of Mann's YouTube videos focuses on a challenge or a social issue, which allows for an activist approach to emerge. Several videos, Mann asks his followers to sing the lyrics and post them on any social media platform, #stayhomevoguechallenge. In another post Mann (2020) states he has teamed with a group to provide certified face masks shipped worldwide. He posts a link for his followers to join in the movement and purchase masks. Mann, as an adaptive leader is able to move his work from a broad view of the balcony and see larger issues while moving conversations of these issues to the dance floor. He has the same qualities of presenting the technical problems or helping to elucidate the adaptive challenges. Mann also moves into the definition of adaptive leadership with his call to action and mobilizing his 191,000 subscribers and/or his 12M views. He can mobilize, tackle and is helping for viewers, organizations, and other creators to thrive.

4 CONCLUSION

It is no doubt that COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted our lives. There is nothing typical about the times we are living in or the measures we have to take for personal safety, health, and existence. The need for hope and resilience is present for so many. The presence of social media is helping to soften

the harshness of social distancing by creating virtual connections. The rise of Zoom happy hours and reaching out to long lost friends is a testament to our need for connection. Corporations, advertisers, and social media influencers already understand this need to mass market personal connections. Adaptive leaders, like Randy Rainbow and Chris Mann, are able to use their brilliance, extreme creativity, speed, and talent to touch the lives of many. Rainbow and Mann are able to touch the lives of their followers through the commonness of the Broadway musical or the pop song to communicate the importance of social distancing or the absurdity of ingesting Lysol.

The implications of their actions personify the definition of adaptive leadership. Their creative products occur at the personal level, on the dance floor, while they show their genius at observing life and society from a big picture level. They produce from the balcony while they mobilize the collective through "tackling tough challenges" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 1) to encourage the spirit to thrive. Through the brilliance of their craft these influencers provide clever and entertaining messages of hope with alacrity. They are touching the hopes of many as they bring a little humor in to their lives to make the realness of unemployment and death not hurt so bad; at least for five minutes at a time. Their leadership is sending messages to millions of people about connections, being resilient, and making a difference. They are indeed mobilizing many to tackle the toughest challenge of a century to make a difference and thrive.

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