THE YOUTUBE SEO PROJECT: TEACHING SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION THROUGH VIDEO

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ABSTRACT

The YouTube SEO Project directs students to research a target market's needs using consumer search demand, create an engaging mobile video that responds to this demand, and use search engine optimization (SEO) to optimize and publish the video for searchers on YouTube.com. Students completing the project reported positive learning outcomes and consistently produced videos that generated their own search traffic by ranking well in YouTube search results. The project gives students practical experience with market research, video creation, and SEO while teaching them to consider consumer needs as well as the competitive landscape in order to identify market opportunities.

Challenge and Course Objectives

Marketing educators recognize the importance of imparting foundational marketing knowledge while also helping students acquire marketable skills through classroom experiences. This is frequently accomplshed through experiential learning, or "learning by doing," which is considered active, reflective, and encourages linkages between abstract lessons and concrete activities (Frontczak, 1998; Sakofs, 1995). Most marketing literature referencing experiential learning is rooted in Kolb's (1984) model of action-reflection, although most experiential activities in marketing rarely engage with the world beyond the classroom (Dahl, Peltier, & Schibrowsky, 2018). Fortunately, digital platforms and other web technologies are increasingly empowering marketing instructors to help students engage and learn from the dynamic marketplace (Ashley, 2013; Cowley, 2017; Granitz & Koernig, 2011; Payne, Campbell, Bal, & Piercy, 2011).

One marketing skill that requires understanding and meeting market needs is search engine optimization (SEO), which brings together a coordinated knowledge of consumer search behavior, search engine algorithms, competitive conditions, and media creation. Web pages, videos, and images can all be optimized to increase their search engine rankings for relevant keyword searches, resulting in search engine referral traffic. While industry and educators highlight the importance of this domain of skills (Liu & Burns,

2018; Schrader, 2018), attempts to teach SEO lack core elements of consumer research, competitive assessment, and the primary objective of relevant traffic generation (Clarke & Clarke, 2014).

To address the need for more experiential SEO education, the YouTube SEO Project (YSP) helps students learn the relevant components of SEO through video – researching, creating, and optimizing a 2-minute video in a way that generates high keyword rankings and search traffic. Through this project, students gain valid experience with SEO and video creation while the project achieves multiple curriculum objectives: students (1) understand the primary strategies and channels of digital marketing, (2) identify and implement best practices across digital channels, and (3) use data to make informed assessments and action plans.

Project Overview

YouTube is the world's largest repository of online videos and the second most visited website globally (Alexa.com, 2020). While SEO is traditionally practiced on company website pages, it is frequently used to optimize videos for searchers. YouTube has several advantages over a more traditional web page for teaching SEO. First, YouTube SEO requires keyword optimization of media elements, plus it rewards video engagement, so students benefit by thinking more strategically about viewer retention and engagement behaviors, e.g.,

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commenting, liking, and sharing (YouTube.com, 2020). Second, videos uploaded to YouTube are immediately available for users to discover in search, whereas the speed of a web page's availabiliy in search may depend on the popularity of the website (Illyes, 2017). Third, mobile video is ubiquitous and increasingly used in experiential learning (Lee, Hoffman, Chowdhury, & Sergueeva, 2018; Peterson, 2018). Finally, YouTube provides video creators with a range of built-in analytics to understand video engagement metrics and video traffic sources (if the instructor chooses to integrate these into the assignment).

YSP Timeline

YSP requires approximately two weeks, including time for instruction time, keyword research and video creation. The instructor prepares students with two key lessons that can be delivered together or spread across two classes. These lessons include (1) understanding search engines, YouTube's algorithm factors, and video creation to account for these factors and (2) researching consumer search demand and existing competition for search queries in order to identify the best target keyword for the video.

Lesson 1: Search Engines

If this is the first mention of search engines in the course, the instructor can help students understand the nature of different algorithms they interact with daily on websites like Google, Amazon, and YouTube and the importance of search engine optimization in marketing practice.

YouTube's search algorithm has three general components (YouTube.com, 2020). First, the *relevance* of the video to the searcher is determined by the inclusion of keywords in appropriate video elements (video title, description, and video tags) that align with the searcher's query. Second, the video's *quality* is assessed by how people interact with it before viewing (click-through rates), during viewing (viewer retention), and after viewing (video engagement behaviors). Third, the *credibility* of the video is often bolstered by the reputation of its channel (videos published on more popular channels receive an inherent advantage).

The instructor can help students make the connection between these algorithm factors outlined by YouTube and the marketer's strategy to account for these factors in their video. Achieving relevance means doing appropriate keyword research to identify ideal keyword opportunities, then including appropriate keywords in the right video elements. Achieving

quality means creating a compelling custom video thumbnail (this feature is unlocked at https://www.youtube.com/verify). Quality means using good viewer retention principles, like stating the topic in the beginning, advancing quickly to the topic, and teasing content that comes later in the video – tactics which increase clarity and watch time (Dean, 2019). Quality also means prompting others to engage with the video (students are required to generate 10 *likes* and 5 comments within 24 hours of publication). The YSP requirements found in Web Appendix A specifically reward students for accounting for these factors in their own video strategies.

Lesson 2: Keyword and Competitive Research

A primary objective of YSP is for students to fully experience the desired outcome of good SEO – seeing their video appear in search results for their target keyword, and generating organic search views. Algorithmically, students are at a disadvantage by using a new YouTube channel for their videos. In order to rank well and get traffic, students must target a keyword phrase that people search, but which is not very competitive – something typical of more specific phrases with lower search demand called "longtail" keywords. Keyword research and competitive research are meant to uncover such market opportunities for the student.

Keyword research is the iterative process of generating keyword ideas, validating whether they are searched, determining whether they are competitive, and repeating this process before settling on one target keyword phrase for the video. A flow chart outlining this process can be found in Web Appendix B. Students should begin their keyword research by thinking of topics that they could realistically make a short video about. Good keyword categories for student videos are tutorials (*how to frost a cake*), reviews (*wilton cake leveler review*), comparisons (*buttercream vs royal icing*), or questions (*how do i make a cake more moist*).

There are multiple ways for students to generate keyword phrases that are actually searched by others. YouTube will automatically provide keyword suggestions as you begin typing a phrase in its search bar. Typing "how to frost a cake" might generate suggestions like "how to frost a cake for beginners." More specific longtail keywords are ideal. Students can also try keyword idea tools like https://www.keywordtool.io. Ultimately, students should identify a core keyword phrase plus variations that are also searched and have the same core meaning and specificity. For example, "frost a cake with a knife" is a good substitute for "frost

a cake with a butter knife," while "how to frost a cake" is not, due to a difference in specificity. Ideally, students should find at least three keyword variations with the same core meaning before moving to the next phase. The instructor can provide the example in Web Appendix C of how to organize these longtail keyword ideas, their search volume, and existing YouTube competition.

Students can then look up the actual monthly search volume for their keyword phrases. Free tools that include this information are https://searchvolume.io and https://ubersuggest.org. A keyword phrase that appears as a suggestion in YouTube's own search bar, but does not show any searches in these search volume tools, is still acceptable to use. These are just less frequent searches. Keyword volume tools only report Google search volumes, which are used as a proxy for YouTube search volume.

Finally, students need to understand how to find a low competition keyword for targeting. This requires doing a YouTube search for each keyword phrase on their list. The student should scan the results of their search for two things: (1) how many existing videos among the top 20 are also using their exact phrase in the video title or description, and (2) how many videos have the same core meaning as their keyword. Searching "how to frost a cake" shows many videos about this topic and multiple videos using the same keyword phrase in video titles. This high competition keyword would make it hard for a new video to rank well. A search for "how to frost a cake with a butter knife" shows no videos using this exact phrase or even mentioning a knife. This would be considered a low competition keyword, giving the student a good chance of ranking well and getting views. Having selected a keyword, the student should then make the video and incorporate this exact phrase naturally into the video title and description before publishing. A visual example is included in Web Appendix D.

Assessment Results

YSP was conducted in three undergraduate digital marketing classes spanning multiple semesters, with 109 students (female = 61.5%, mean age = 23.2). The class is an elective marketing class with no prerequisite digital marketing experience. The performance of student videos in YouTube search results provides initial evidence of YSP's effectiveness. Of 107 student videos, 48 (44.9%) achieved a top 10 ranking for their target keyword 2 weeks after publication (https://ytrank.net used to check rankings). Student videos ranked high enough to generate more than 1,000 views each for keyword phrases as varied as *how to*

make a cortado, having a pet in college, cheerleader shoulder sit, air fried plantains, and *vans comfycush vs pro*. A web page SEO project used by Clarke and Clarke (2014) reported that 43.2% of students ranked in the top 5 pages of search results, but no search engine traffic was produced. In contrast, YSP resulted in 67.3% of students attaining a top-5 page position, plus organic traffic generation, demonstrating superior results while accomplishing the primary traffic objective of SEO.

Students voluntarily completing a survey for participation points two weeks following the assignment, and were asked about strengths and weaknesses of learning SEO through the YouTube SEO Project. Results in Web Appendix E show the open-ended responses as coded by the instructor following procedures established by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The process included reading all responses first to understand the general nature of the data before rereading to organize them by themes and patterns. The resulting themes are ordered by frequency, (Cowley, 2017; Sojka & Fish, 2008).

Qualitative results suggest that YSP succeeds in several ways. Based on attributes that were top-of-mind, students report that YSP helps them learn and apply SEO and associated subskills effectively with impact. One student wrote, "After doing all the research and creation and optimization, we were able to see actual, real-world results and experience what actually happens when people do this for businesses." Students also see YSP as providing a challenging task that teaches career-relevant skills and tools while offering creative expression. Another student wrote, "The hands-on experience with a personal touch allowed this project to solidify itself in my mind as one of the most relevant and beautiful projects I have done [in college]."

Project Challenges

Real-world applied projects like YSP are prone to some unpredictability and challenges. The instructor's own feelings of self-efficacy can impede the important task of preparing students for the iterative steps of doing keyword research, identifying a target keyword, creating and optimizing the video, and publishing it on YouTube. Instructors should complete these steps personally as the safest route to later assisting students and clarifying the process.

The most common challenges for students, as expressed in qualitative feedback, are also related to self-efficacy. Students report feeling challenged by the learning curve presented by the SEO process and professional SEO tools, as well as video creation. Instructors can help by providing more time and resources to complete the project. Students may feel empowered by having access to

more instructional material, like online tutorials about video editing. In some cases, university employees and technological resources are available to assist students with video creation. Video editing software like iMovie is common, while Apple Clips and Adobe Premiere Rush are free mobile applications with editing features. Edited video is not a focal learning objective of YSP, but the pervasiveness of student smartphone ownership should enable any student without a phone to borrow one in order to record a 2-minute video in a single take.

Adaptation

While SEO is a core skill for digital marketers, this project has potential adaptability for other classes. The nature of YSP makes it appropriate for a marketing strategy class, as it squarely fits a "*blue ocean strategy*" approach to identifying uncontested market space (Kim & Mauborgne, 2014). The process of understanding consumer behavior through keywords is an appropriate exercise for a consumer behavior class. Advertising classes can teach the value of optimizing campaign assets. For any class, the instructor could choose to narrow the topic of student videos to keywords that are relevant to the course (for instance, the phrase *price anchoring examples* is a low-competition keyword that students could target through video SEO). YSP could also be adapted to exclude the actual video creation, but focus on the critical keyword research and planning. Instructors may choose to go beyond research and video creation to include detailed video analytics. The project can also be adapted for groups.

SEO is a challenging domain for students to experience firsthand, but the YouTube SEO Project demonstrably empowers students to reap the rewards of good research and algorithm-conscious video execution in the form of rankings that produce learning and actual search traffic. This project combines consumer behavior and competitive strategy to teach a modern marketing skill that can be adapted and applied both personally and professionally.

Disclosure statement

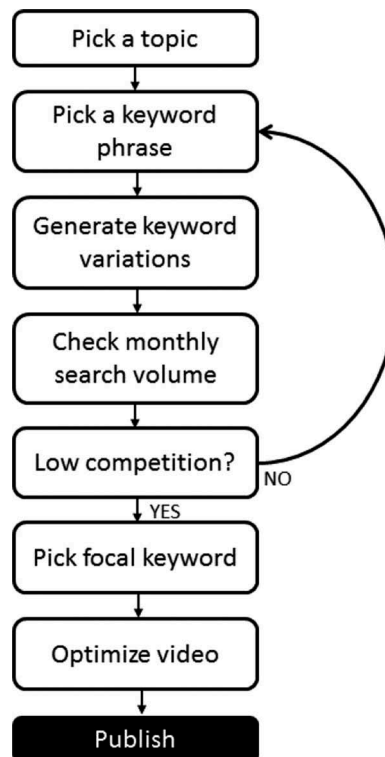No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Web Appendix A. YouTube Ranking Factors and Video Requirements

Ranking Factor	Video Requirement
Relevance	
Video title optimization	Incorporate keyword phrase in the title
Video description optimization	Incorporate keyword phrase in the description
Video tags	Choose relevant video tags
Quality	
Video retention	State the topic of the video
	Keep the introduction brief
	Tease something coming later in the video
Engagement	Generate 5 comments and 10 likes within a day of publication
Click-through rate	Create a custom video thumbnail
Credibility	
Channel subscribers	N/A
Total channel watch time	N/A

Web Appendix B. Video SEO Process

Web Appendix C. Keyword Research Table

| Keyword	Monthly Search Volume	YouTube Competition **High**: Many videos using the exact keyword or many videos talking about the same topic **Medium**: Few videos using the exact keyword or few videos talking about the same topic **Low**: Very few videos using the exact keyword or very few videos talking about the same topic
How to frost a cake with a butter knife	10	Low – No perfectly optimized titles, 1 video description mentioning butter knife
Frost a cake with a butter knife	<10 (YouTube Suggested)	Low – No perfectly optimized titles, no mention of "butter knife"
How to frost a cake with a knife	<10 (YouTube Suggested)	Low – No perfectly optimized titles, 2 titles mention "knife", 1 description mentions "knife"

Web Appendix D. Search Result Keyword Competition Audit

YouTube search results for "how to frost a cake"
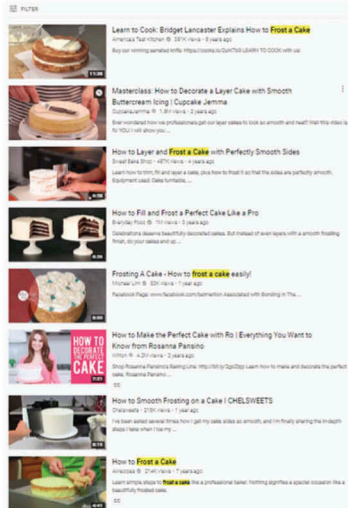
High Competition: Multiple popular videos include "how to frost a cake" in the title or description.

"how to frost a cake with a butter knife"
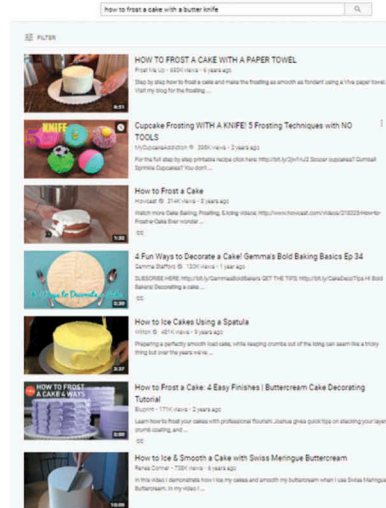
Low Competition: No videos use the full keyword or even mention "butter knife" in the title or description.

Web Appendix E. Student Self-Reported Strengths and Challenges of YSP

Project Strengths	% Mentioning Theme
1. Teaches SEO/related skills (keyword research, competitive research)	59.3
2. Applies class concepts in a real way	39.8
3. Provides an opportunity for creativity and personal choice	24.1
4. Teaches relevant skills for career/interviews	19.4
5. Challenges students by getting them out of their comfort zones	17.6
6. Provides a better experience than traditional modes of learning	13.9
7. Requires critical thinking to succeed	13.0
8. Allows students to experience actual results and success	10.2
9. Teaches video skills	8.3
10. Provides a fun experience	8.3
11. Teaches relevant skills for personal use	5.6
12. Gives students experience with industry tools	5.6
Project Challenges	
1. Challenging for students who lack video experience	22.4
2. Difficult to choose a topic/be creative	21.5
3. Difficult to meet a short deadline	16.9
4. Challenging to get the desired rankings/results	14.0
5. Learning curve for SEO tools	10.3
6. Complexity of following the full SEO process	8.4
7. Uncomfortable with being on film	7.5
8. Learning curve for video editing tools	5.6
n = 109	