

The role of YouTube video essays on the impact of Digital Cultural Discourse

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Abstract: YouTube video essays have come out as very powerful digital content that unite images, narration, and analytical thinking to pull in and convert different audiences to modern-day cultural criticism. Positioned as a hybrid between the documentary, criticism, and personal commentary, these essays give quite accessible and often long-form reflections on the topics like films, television, politics, identity, and internet culture. Their modal structure which is a combination of the voice-over, clips, graphics, and textual overlays allows the creator to clear out the difficult and complex ideas in a manner that is both entertaining and intellectually engaging for the viewers. The format has especially attracted the very young and digitally-savvy audience who are relying on the former media and academia for less and less in these times of heavy internet-based culture. This survey-based study quantitatively investigates the interpretation, evaluation, and persuasion of the viewer by YouTube video essays, focusing specifically on engagement, trust, and perceived impact on cultural discourse. The survey delves into viewing frequency, preferred topics, and cognitive and emotional involvement levels while watching video essays. It also gauging impressions of credibility, such as how much independent creators are trusted compared to institutional sources, and to what degree audiences are aware that video essays are changing or reinforcing their opinions on cultural and social issues. By employing validated scales corresponding to media engagement, perceived influence, and critical reflection, this study reveals how audiences not only perceive these videos as entertainment but also as significant cultural commentary. The findings imply that video essays are significant in bringing up cultural debates with fresh and hardly heard voices, especially by making the independent and very different creators visible in public dialogue. Younger audiences especially consider video essays as the here-and-now and powerful means of letting them to think about and discuss such topics as representation, power and ideology in the popular media of their choice. The overall results draw attention to the importance of the YouTube video essays as a strong and participatory art form that governs the digital cultural discourse, by making cultural criticism more accessible, dialogic and blending it with daily media consumption habits.

Key Words: YouTube, video essays, digital culture, cultural discourse, persuasion, engagement

1. INTRODUCTION

YouTube acts as a powerful cultural institution that shapes not only entertainment habits but also the societal understanding of complex identities and global issues. Through audiovisual storytelling, video essays normalize critical thinking and provide a platform for diverse voices. In the contemporary digital landscape, video essays have emerged alongside participatory platforms where audiences actively shape narratives. This study examines how these essays function as a "social actor" in making cultural criticism accessible and dialogic.

- Analyze demographic consumer trends for YouTube video essays on social and cultural issues.
- Study audience perception of the effectiveness of persuasion, trustworthiness, and influence of video essays on their opinions.
- Examine the incidence of engagement such as talk activation and sharing of the video upon completion as a result of consuming the video essay.

3. SCOPE OF RESEARCH

- Analyses the interpretive and persuasive power of YouTube video essays among GenZ students.
- Examines the impact of specific audiovisual elements, such as narrative structure, visuals, and music, on audience retention.
- Studies audience reactions, including trust levels compared to traditional media and the motivation for social sharing.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

- Demonstrates how video essays act as a revolutionary medium for digital cultural discourse among youth.
- Highlights the potential of independent creators to circulate counter-narratives and promote social awareness.
- Provides empirical data for educators and content creators on the nature of evolving cultural critique.

5. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Current scholarly discourse highlights a transition from traditional institutional gatekeeping to a decentralized digital landscape where the "video essay" serves as a primary vehicle for cultural critique. While historical marketing and media often reinforced rigid societal norms, modern video essays act as a deconstructive force, challenging established tropes and providing a platform for marginalized voices. For GenZ students, this medium represents a shift in digital literacy; they no longer rely on superficial news bites but seek out 20-to-60-minute "deep dives" that offer a sense of "parasocial pedagogy". This literary tradition allows for a more nuanced exploration of identity and ethics than what is typically found in traditional television or standard advertisements. By integrating personal narrative with rigorous research, these essays bridge the gap between academic theory and everyday digital consumption.

6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The investigation depends on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion which depicts the way people receiving persuasive communications by either central (deep, thoughtful) or peripheral (surface-level, sensory) routes. This model is utilized in understanding how changes in attitude and participation brought about by the video essay are influenced by these elements to the extent of a person's visual, audio, or credibility impression. In a similar way, the uses and gratifications theory identifies the reasons for the consumption of video essays such as education and entertainment thereby establishing a link between media consumption and the active fulfillment of audience needs.

This theory provides a basis for the study of YouTube video essays as both intellectual and emotional instruments that influence the digital cultural discourse, empower learning, and encourage the social interaction of the different youth viewers.

7. RESEARCH GAP

Earlier studies have examined video essays as instruments of education and culture, but a gap remains in the quantitative measurement of their precise effect on the cultural digital discourse of the youth population. The gap is especially significant in the aspects of persuasive influence, motivation, and trust comparative to traditional media. Moreover, the gender-skewed audience and different content preferences highlight the necessity for further investigation of the extent to which these factors influence the digital cultural engagement of the youth.

8. METHODOLOGY

The research used a descriptive quantitative survey design as its main method. The sample consisted of 115 respondents, over half of which were between 18 and 24 years old (57.4%). The study aimed to find out how YouTube video essays influenced culture-related discussions. The questionnaire was composed of closed-ended questions that measured demographic information, frequency of viewing, favorite content, and the degree of persuasion, change of views, level of engagement, and trust in the video essays. The data gathering instrument consisted of Likert scales and frequency counts that were examined by means of descriptive statistics to uncover the patterns of the respondents' motivation, impact, and interaction with the video essays.

Research Questions:

1. What is the demographic profile (age, gender) of the people who comment and share YouTube video essays?
2. In which ways do the viewers rate the influencer power and credibility of YouTube video essays against those of the conventional media?
3. What first and foremost reasons and what subsequent effects of the video essay consumption on viewers' cultural understanding and social engagement are most prominent?

8.1 Research method

A structured questionnaire was used as the major data collection instrument in a quantitative research manner for this dissertation. The questionnaire was intended to collect the detailed demographic information and the respondents' views, behaviours, and perceptions related to video essays. It consisted of closed-ended questions with scales and multiple-choice answers, concentrating on such aspects as the frequency of watching video essays, content preferences, persuasion effectiveness, impact on views, and motivations for viewing.

The survey was designed to reach a diverse population and ended with a youthful concentration of respondents, mainly aged 18-24. The questionnaire was circulated digitally to attract a large audience that had access to online platforms. The data analysis process involved the use of frequency counts, percentages, and interpretative summaries to explain the patterns of the engagement, preferences, and the perceived impacts. The quantitative approach has given measurable insights into how different demographic groups interact with and perceive video essay content.

8.2 Sampling method

Stratified random sampling was the method chosen to guarantee representation from the different demographic groups of the population. The overall sample of 115 respondents was broken down into strata based on features such as age group and gender, thus mirroring the target audience of video essay consumers. Subsequently, each layer was randomly sampled relative to its size, thus a balanced and representative dataset was obtained. With this method, it was possible to get more accurate insights into the behaviour of different segments, for instance, the youth and gender groups, in relation to the use of video essays as well as their perception of them.

The survey was separated into two parts: the first one gathered demographic data such as age, gender, and educational background, while the second one dealt with respondents' engagement, knowledge, impact, and awareness concerning video essays.

9. CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

DATA ANALYSIS

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

- Age group of the respondents

AGE GROUP	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Less than 18	12	10.4%
18-24	66	57.4%
25-34	17	14.8%
35-44	7	6.1%
45-54	9	7.8%
55+	4	3.5%
Total	115	100%

The data above illustrate that most the respondents belong to the age group 18-24 with 57.4% of the total, and the 25-34 years of age group account for 14.8% of the total.

Together the three youngest groups (Less than 18, 18-24, and 25-34) make up 82.6% of the total respondents. It is evident from this that the majority of the responses are from young people who are mostly digitally active or use the internet extensively.

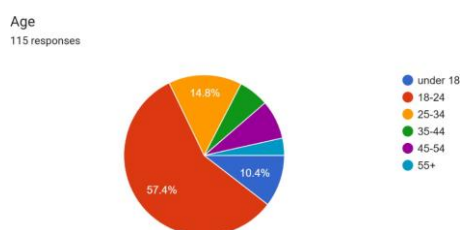


Figure 1

- Gender of the respondents

GENDER	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Male	37	32.2%

Female	70	60.9%
Non-Binary	3	2.6%
Prefer not to say	5	4.3%
Total	115	100%

The given data reveals that most of the respondents are Females which make up 60.9% of the total (70 individuals). Next to them are Male respondents, who account for 32.2% of the total (37 individuals).

After that, the gender categories Non-Binary and Prefer not to say combined make up a very small percentage of the total responses. As a result, the graph demonstrates that the audience distribution in terms of gender is heavily imbalanced with the female group being almost twice as large as the male group, which implies that the survey's results will most likely reflect the characteristics and opinions of the female participants.

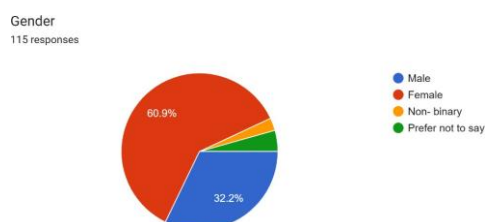


Figure-2

- Frequency of watching YouTube video essays:

OPTIONS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Never	6	5.2%
Rarely	16	13.9%
Sometimes	48	41.7%
Often	22	22.6%
Always	19	16.5%
Total	115	100%

The information above reflects that most of the respondents have ticked the "Sometimes" option, which represents 41.7% of the total (48 individuals). The next position is occupied by the "Often" response, which makes up 22.6% of the total (22 individuals).

Those who frequently participated in the activity ("Sometimes," "Often," and "Always") accounted for 80.8% of the total responses ($41.7\% + 22.6\% + 16.5\% = 80.8\%$). It is evident from this that the majority of responses are concentrated in the medium to high-frequency range, which implies that most people, although not necessarily all the time, engage with the activity or topic checked in the survey.

How often do you watch YouTube video essays?
115 responses

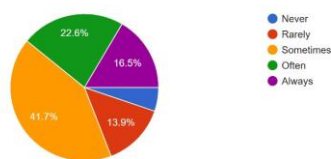


Figure-3

- Which content topics do you usually watch in video essays?

TOPICS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Culture	37	32.2%
Media critique	15	13%
Social Issues	52	45.2%
Others	11	9.6%

The data above clearly indicate that most of the respondents have "Social Issues" as their preferred choice, accounting for 45.2% of the total (52 individuals). After that, the subject "Culture" represents 32.2% of the overall (37 individuals) respectively.

The top two issues, "Social Issues" and "Culture", correspond to 77.4% of the total responses ($45.2\% + 32.2\% = 77.4\%$). It is evident from this point that the majority of the answers are quite heavily concentrated on the issues of societal structures and cultural content, which shows that the audience has a strong inclination towards topics related to their social environment and surrounding traditions.

Which content topics do you usually watch in video essays?
115 responses

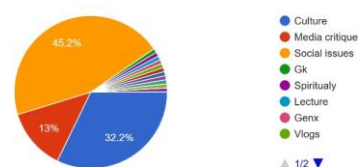


Figure-5

- Persuasion effectiveness:

SCALE(not persuasive at all- very persuasive)	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	12	10.4%
2	14	12.2%
3	48	41.7%
4	26	22.6%
5	15	13%

The data above indicates that most respondents chose '3' (Neutral) on the scale, which made up 41.7% of the total (48 individuals). After that, the level of '4' is followed, which accounts for 22.6% of the total (26 individuals).

The sum of the responses for the neutral and positive end of the scale (3, 4, and 5) represents a large 77.3% of the total responses. From this, one can infer that the general feeling of the persuasiveness was to some extent positive, as a majority of the audience considered the speaker as being either somewhat or moderately persuasive, rather than strongly negative (scores 1 and 2).

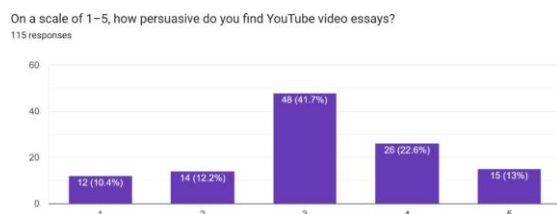


Figure-6

1- What kind of impact do video essays have on the respondent's views

SCALE(not at all- completely changed)	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	12	10.4%
2	25	21.7%
3	37	32.2%
4	30	26.1%
5	11	9.6%

The main part of the respondents picked the option '3' from the scale, as can be seen from the data above, which corresponds to 32.2% of the total (37 individuals). The next position is occupied by the rating '4', which accounts for 26.1% of the total (30 individuals).

Those two middle ratings, '3' and '4' together, represent 58.3% of the total responses ($32.2\% + 26.1\% = 58.3\%$). Positive responses on the scale (3, 4, and 5) make up 67.9% ($32.2\% + 26.1\% + 9.6\% = 67.9\%$) of the total. Over here, the general extent of the impact or change can be considered as a moderate to significant one since more than two-thirds of the audience have declared some level of change or impact (scores 3, 4, or 5)

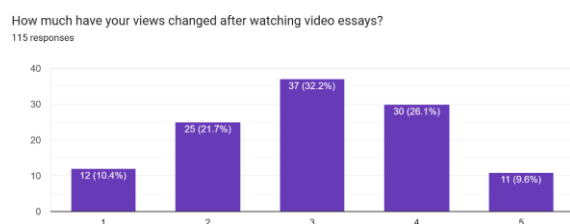


Figure-7

1. Respondent's frequency of interaction with video essays

OPTIONS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Never	17	14.8%
Rarely	40	34.8%

Sometimes	46	40%
Often	10	8.7%
Always	2	1.7%
Total	115	100%

The data above reveals that most of the respondents chose "Sometimes", which amounted to 40.0% of the total (46 individuals). The response "Rarely" is thus very close to it, representing 34.8% of the total (40 individuals).

The low engagement levels ("Never" and "Rarely") together represent 49.6% of the total responses (14.8% + 34.8% = 49.6%). The categories indicating moderate to high engagement ("Sometimes," "Often," and "Always") correspond to 50.4% (40.0% + 8.7% + 1.7% = 50.4%) of the total. This is where the audience can be seen as being almost equally split between low frequency and moderate/high frequency engagement, with a slight majority that indicates they engage "Sometimes" or more frequently.

How often do you engage with video essays by commenting or sharing?
115 responses

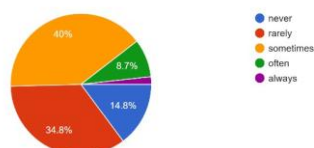


Figure-8

- Most impactful video element

ELEMENT	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Narratives	32	27.8%
Visuals	53	46.1%
Music	46	40%
Data/ Research	45	39.1%
Presenter credibility	22	19.1%
Total	115	100%

According to the first table, the most frequently selected element is "Visuals" by 46.1% of the respondents (53 individuals). Next to "Visuals", "Music" was picked by 40.0% of the total (46 individuals).

Almost two-fifths of the audience have chosen the top three elements—Visuals (46.1%), Music (40.0%), and Data/Research (39.1%)—that is, approximately 38% of the respondents for each of the three options. The audience here is seen to value the most sensory and informational elements, which means that if the target group is this one, the communication should be made through engaging graphics, sound, and factual support rather than simply telling a story or the presenter's trust.

Which video elements influence you the most?
115 responses



Figure-9

1. The role of video essays in comprehension of cultural topics:

SCALE(Least likely to most likely)	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	10	8.7%
2	17	14.8%
3	28	24.3%
4	39	33.9%
5	21	18.3%

The data above represent the majority of the respondents who chose '4' on the scale, which constitutes 33.9% of the total (39 individuals). After that, the rating '3' (Neutral/Mid-point) is leading, representing 24.3% of the total (28 individuals). The categories expressing a higher probability (4 and 5) together indicate 52.2% of the total responses ($33.9\% + 18.3\% = 52.2\%$). The categories on the positive side of the scale (3, 4, and 5) contribute a significant 70.5% ($24.3\% + 33.9\% + 18.3\% = 70.5\%$) of the responses. The audience here is seen as an overall tendency to be likely to take the action or have the characteristic being measured with a clear concentration of responses in the upper half of the scale.

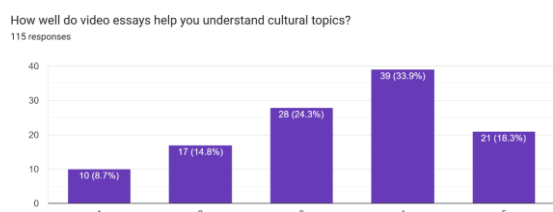


Figure-10

1) Respondent's rating of trustworthiness of video essays in comparison to traditional media

SCALE(Least trustworthy to most trustworthy)	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	10	8.7%
2	19	16.5%
3	44	38.3%
4	25	21.7%
5	17	14.8%

The data above reflect that most respondents picked the number '3' (Neutral/Mid-point) on the scale, which made up 38.3% of the total (44 individuals). The rating '4' comes second, representing 21.7% of the total (25 individuals).

The figures for trust from neutral to very high (3, 4, and 5) trust basically sum up to 74.8% of the total answers ($38.3\% + 21.7\% + 14.8\% = 74.8\%$). At this point, we can say that the audience's collective perception of trustworthiness is quite high as three-quarters of the respondents have rated the trustworthiness of the subject at least at the midpoint which is indicative of a general level of acceptance or belief rather than of strong skepticism.

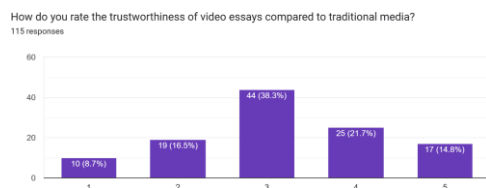


Figure-11

1) Respondent's tendency to spark discussion online/offline based on video essays

OPTIONS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Never	7	6.1%
Rarely	9	7.8%
Sometimes	63	54.8%
Often	24	20.9%
Always	12	10.4%

According to the above figures, most of the respondents (63 persons) or 54.8% of the total, decided to put "Sometimes" as their answer. The option "Often" is the second most selected, accounting for 20.9% of the total (24 persons).

The three categories, indicating frequent engagement ("Sometimes," "Often," and "Always") together represent a very significant 86.1% of the total responses ($54.8\% + 20.9\% + 10.4\% = 86.1\%$). It means that most of the respondents from the sample were at least "Sometimes" or more frequently engaged in the surveyed activity or topic, thus, a high overall level of involvement is apparent.



Figure -12

1. How likely are respondents to share a video essay with friends or family?

SCALE(least likely to most likely)	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	16	13.9%
2	29	25.2%
3	32	27.8%
4	26	22.6%
5	12	10.4%

The data above reveals that most of the people who answered the question chose the option '3' (Neutral/Mid-point) on the scale. Those people made up 27.8% of the total (32 individuals). The rating '2' is also very close to this and makes up 25.2% of the total (29 individuals). The likelihood categories pointing to a lesser degree (1 and 2) together account for 39.1% of the responses, whereas the likelihood categories pointing to a

higher degree (4 and 5) constitute 33.0% of the total. Nevertheless, the responses on the neutral and positive sides of the scale (3, 4, and 5) represent 60.8% of the total. The overall tendency of the audience here is seen to be split, but they slightly lean towards the neutral or moderate likelihood, which means that although a significant portion is unlikely (scores 1 and 2), the largest single group is at the middle of the scale.

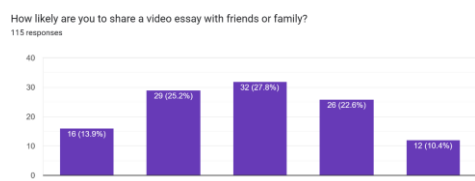


Figure-13

- Respondent's motivation for watching video essays

OPTIONS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Curiosity	22	19.1%
Education	58	50.4%
Entertainment	25	21.7%
Social Engagement	10	8.7%
Total	115	100%

The statistics above indicate that most respondents decided for "Education," which made up 50.4% of the total (58 individuals). After that, there is the selection "Entertainment," which represents 21.7% of the total (25 individuals). The reasons for choosing the learning and enjoyment-related categories ("Education" and "Entertainment") together account for a very large 72.1% of the total responses ($50.4\% + 21.7\% = 72.1\%$). Thus, the users here are shown to be mostly motivated by their personal intellectual and recreational needs, with the main reason being to acquire knowledge or to be entertained, rather than satisfying one's curiosity or engaging socially.

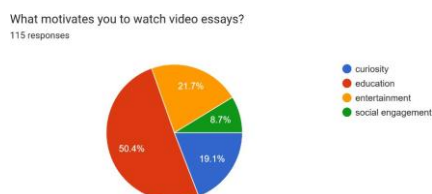


Figure-14

- Respondent's rating of the overall quality of the video essays they watch

RATING(poor-excellent)	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	9	7.8%
2	10	8.7%
3	31	27%
4	44	38.3%
5	21	18.3%

Based on the above figures, most of the respondents chose '4' from the rating scale, which accounts for 38.3% of the total (44 people). Next to that, the rating '3' (Neutral/Mid-point) is representing 27.0% of the total (31 people).

The positive categories (4 and 5) combined formed a major 56.6% of the total responses ($38.3\% + 18.3\% = 56.6\%$). If we add the neutral score to the positive ones (3, 4, and 5), the number of positive ratings reaches 83.6% ($27.0\% + 38.3\% + 18.3\% = 83.6\%$) of the responses. So, it is obvious that the overall quality or the level of satisfaction is considered to be high to excellent as most of the respondents have rated the subject in a positive way (3 or higher).

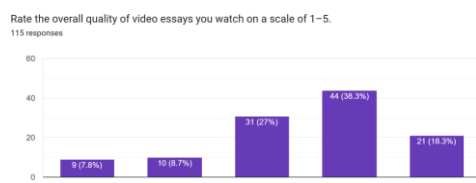


Figure-15

12. CONCLUSION

The video essay has become one of the most influential and attractive forms of contemporary digital media. In an efficient way, it is a link between the old academic system and the new accessible online content, whereby complex ideas are converted to engaging, narrative-driven viewing experiences.

Key Cultural Functions:

- **Elevated Discourse:** Video essays function as an intellectual discourse level enhancer in the online environment. They provide the audience with insightful, well-researched, and deeply contextualized critiques of topics ranging from film theory and cultural phenomena to complicated social issues.
- **Engagement and Education:** The medium is based on a fundamental "edutainment" model and, therefore, it thrives. By the use of attractive visuals, music, and storytelling, the method is to a large extent successful in the captivation of the audience—especially that of the youth—thus making learning and critical thinking an entertaining endeavor.
- **Catalysts for Conversation:** Video essays, as things of interest, viewers take actively rather than passively, are very efficacious in provoking discussions and thus driving conversations on different social platforms. They act as a common cultural reference point which not only makes the audience members understand their thoughts better but also, impels them to share their views.

Basically, the video essay is a potent instrument of digital literacy and cultural criticism. Whilst it informs and entertains, it also, quite forcefully, rallies its audience to delve into societal issues and participate in the collective dialogue.

12. KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Youth Dominance:** The video essay audience is primarily composed of young people, with the 18-24 age group being the largest single segment (57.4%). The three age groups, "Less than 18", "18-24", and "25-34" together make up 82.6% of the respondents, thereby revealing a strong link between video essays and the youth who are very active in the digital world.

- **Significant Gender Skew:** As far as gender is concerned, the respondent pool shows an evident bias with Females dominating at 60.9%, almost double the Male percentage (32.2%). The implication of these findings is that the research results mostly reflect the opinions and behaviors of young female video essay consumers.
- **Education and Entertainment are Primary Motivations:** The main motives for the viewing of video essays are Educating the viewer (50.4%) and Entertaining (21.7%) which together make up more than 72% of the reported reasons. By this, video essays become a major source of "edutainment" for this audience.
- **High Engagement and Quality Perception:** The activity is highly rated for overall quality (83.6% of ratings 3 or higher) and is performed with high frequency (80.8% "Sometimes" or more). The audience's behavior here indicates a positive and continuous engagement.
- **Visuals are the Most Impactful Element:** The people surveyed were asked to think of the most impactful elements. They chose Visuals (46.1%) and Music (40.0%) as their top two for the most impactful elements. The audience prefers to have their senses appealed to as well as going for a high production value, rather than Narratives (27.8%) or Presenter Credibility (19.1%).
- **Focus on Societal Topics:** The content that the users of the platform are partaking in is largely concentrating on Social Issues (45.2%) and Culture (32.2%). In sum, these two topics represent more than three-quarters (77.4%) of the content watched. The implication here is that the audience uses video essays for the topics related to their social and cultural environment.
- **Moderate Impact and High Discussion Propensity:** The people who were surveyed said that this had a moderate positive effect on their point of view and that the essay was somewhat persuasive (around 77% and 68% respectively, rated 3). However, there is also a very high tendency to discuss based on the content, with 86.1% of people saying that they do so "Sometimes" or more frequently. So, these essays mainly work as a social sharing and conversation catalyst, rather than as a tool for instant opinion change.

13. LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

- **Sample Demographics and Geographic Concentration:** The study primarily focuses on GenZ students, largely within a specific academic environment or geographic area (such as Bangalore). This limits the generalizability of the findings to older generations or youth in rural areas who may have different digital consumption patterns.
- **Self-Reported Data Bias:** The research relies on survey responses and self-assessment regarding how much a viewer's perspective has changed. Respondents may overstate their critical engagement or the impact of a video to align with socially desirable traits, such as being "informed" or "socially conscious".
- **Platform-Specific Focus:** By focusing exclusively on YouTube, the study may overlook how cultural discourse is shaped by cross-platform interactions, such as how video essay clips are decontextualized on TikTok or Instagram Reels.

14. SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

1. Regional Differences in Reception

India is culturally heterogeneous. Future studies should examine how audiences in different states interpret video essays differently based on local traditions, regional languages (e.g., Hindi, Tamil, or Kannada), and socio-economic backgrounds to see if the "digital divide" impacts cultural discourse.

2. Longitudinal Impact on Behavior

Do video essays lead to lasting behavioral change? Future research could track GenZ students over several years to determine if consistent exposure to digital critique results in sustained social activism, changes in voting patterns, or permanent shifts in consumer ethics.

3. Intersection of Algorithms & Echo Chambers

Understanding how algorithmic amplification intensifies specific viewpoints is crucial. Future research should investigate whether the YouTube recommendation engine fosters diverse cultural understanding or traps GenZ students in ideological echo chambers that reinforce existing biases.

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