Chapter 8

Everything Is Content:
A Gen Z Approach to Exploring African American History and Culture at a HBCU

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores content creation in relation to internet memes and the origin of the concept of memes as explained by Richard Dawkins' meme theory. It argues that as transmitters and replicators of cultural information memes, including social media content have the potential to serve as powerful and effective vehicles for disseminating cultural information and creating cultural spaces. For students, social media use is often a part of their daily routine and lifestyle with a focus on professional use. Using the case study of a first-year course at an HBCU, the chapter explores how the "everything is content" philosophy can be applied in instruction to curate a cultural classroom space, foster students' abilities to make connections between academic and social content and encourage students' critical thinking of their role in the creation and sharing of cultural through their social media use.

INTRODUCTION

Young people making plans for their education, careers, and future in the early 2000s could have never imagined that their options might include becoming a content creator, influencer, podcaster, or anything of the sort. We were fresh off of Black Planet and MySpace. Facebook was exclusively for college students. Twitter was the

place where we gathered to watch Award shows together, and Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok were distant thoughts. Today, the options for social media and content creation platforms are endless. Academics and non-academics alike have seized the golden opportunity to use these platforms to educate themselves and others on everything; history, politics, computer programming, astrology, cosmetology, dancing, everyday lifestyle hacks, and everything in between. Social media users can function as both student and teacher simultaneously. Furthermore, the monetization of viral content has promoted content creation, influencer lifestyles, podcasting, streaming, and vlogging as lucrative occupations. The world's transition to virtual operations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic aided greatly in this process. Students matriculating through college and university in the last five years (the COVID Class), are noticeably impacted by this as they transitioned from secondary to post-secondary education in a virtual environment. Consequently, many Gen Z scholars entering college and university have already begun their content creation pursuits or aspire to join the ranks of viral and high paid content creators.

The catchphrase, "Everything is content," can be found all over the internet. It is the title of books, articles, think pieces, blogs. There is even a viral audio sound that can be used to create Instagram and TikTok reels. This philosophy has become increasingly popular. This sometimes poses challenges, as students may seem obsessed with their phones and social media. As societies become more virtual, the social media fascination is only likely to become exacerbated. And, social media does offer many benefits for the dissemination of information, sharing of culture, and building of community. For example, social media and Black content creators throughout the diaspora have also contributed greatly to social justice, activism, and digital protest efforts. Citing the trending of #Ferguson following the murder of Michael Brown, Bonilla and Rosa (2015) argue, "…social media participation becomes a key site from which to contest mainstream media silences and the long history of state-sanctioned violence against racialized populations" (12). Since then, there have been countless other racialized deaths, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Atatiana Jefferson, countless mass shootings, and more. In each situation, corresponding trending hashtags and sharing of footage, sometimes live have contributed to the awareness of injustice. Contrarily, some have critiqued the mass circulation of videos and photos of the violent episode citing that it glorifies and desensitizes the world to violence against and killing of Black bodies. Thus, content creation surrounding these, and other racialized topics requires thoughtful and sensitive maneuvering. Podcasts have become a viable platform for many African American youth seeking to remain educated on relevant political and pop cultural themes. This includes popular Black media outlets such as *Higher Learning*, *Jemelle Hill is Unbothered*, *Code Switch,* and *the Joe Budden Podcast.* All attract millions of young African American viewers and listeners weekly displaying mixed

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