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Boundless curiosity: Rhetoric making learning impassioned, interesting, and iconic.

A person holding a small device

Description automatically generatedOne of the largest factors driving what we decide is rhetoric. Rhetoric is a multi-medium tool that is used to influence the decisions of another. This is extremely important for generating integrity, responsibility, teamwork, motivation, etc. We see these qualities being used by many different people and for many different reasons. For instance, a president promoting their policy, social media posts to support a cause, or even the news influencing what you believe. Many people use rhetorical strategy, so what would define a rhetorical superhero? A rhetorical superhero uses many different persuasive strategies, such as ethos logos pathos, aimed at motivating their audience towards taking the initiative for the better. For such case, I believe Michael Stevens (Commonly known as Vsauce Fig. 1) to be the perfect rhetorical superhero because of his important role in motivating people of all ages, to become eager to learn more as well as broaden their curiosity. These qualities are the most important driving forces of research and development that can take seemingly inapplicable concepts and apply them to fields that have real-world benefits for our society. A perfect example of this is using knot theory, a commonly thought seemly theoretical exclusive set of axioms, that identify different unique loops of string. These identifications have discovered use in the biological field of protein folding, DNA/RNA structures, and even medicine. Michael Stevens is a widely popular YouTube science and education channel speaker who created his channel to create a connection between uncommon topics and valuable lessons. Michael Stevens has a bachelor’s degree in both Psychology and English Literature which led to a path of theater and video production. (Michael Stevens Bio Pg. 1) He began a YouTube channel starting from 2010 and has become a widely known inspirational speaker up to 2023. His main method of providing knowledge is through his YouTube channel’s videos and shorts. Michael’s TED talk is extremely important because it encompasses the drive of his content and the reasons why he creates educational videos. Michael Stevens is a rhetorical superhero through his clever use of ethos, logos, and pathos in his TED talk “Why Do We Ask Questions?” to persuade his audience to peruse knowledge and not be afraid to seek explanations. In this analysis I will cover how Michael uses ethos through credibility through explanation and background, logos using logic and reason behind the structure of his content, and lastly pathos through the abundant use of jokes and humor to keep the audience engaged.

Figure 1: Michael Stevens speaks at different TED talk “How much does a video weigh?”

In Michael Stevens’ TED talk, he uses ethos by showing his credibility in his youth, credibility in how he addresses his audience’s values and credibility in thorough research into each topic. During the beginning of Michael’s talk, he went into some of his background in his youth. Specifically sharing what he did in high school as a precursor to his career. During this section, Michael stated, “When I was a teenager, I discovered a competitive speaking program and one of the events was informative speaking … My very first informative speech ever was about ketchup. The history of ketchup, the etymology of the name, its legal status, the physics of its viscosity and how it flowed. It was super nerdy stuff but at my very, very first

public speaking tournament, I took first place. Hey! Look at that guy.” (“Why Do We Ask Questions?” 5:57 – 6:43) This statement uses ethos to familiarize the audience with Michael’s experience in informative speaking. The statement shows that back in his youth, he was very passionate about the same topic he dwells on today. Michael is effectively using this rhetorical strategy to show his experience in the field and motivation to do it right. A bit later on in the talk, Michael states how he views the audience and alters his delivery methods accordingly, “So I’ve found that one of the best ways to gain attentive listeners is not to be who you think your audience wants you to be but instead to say and make and show things that allow your audience or your students to be who they want to be.” (“Why Do We Ask Questions?” 8:41 – 9:02) This powerful statement shows the use of ethos through the credibility of open-minded teaching. It shows trust and care for the audience/learners which raises Michael’s credibility as an informative speaker. The statement also shows that Michael is concerned about attentive listeners and that he will go to lengths to fulfill each of his content consumers. Shortly after, Michael states his solution to the statement above, “So what do you do — I’m trying to collect the largest audience possible that I can I want to appeal to and attract as many people as possible. So what I do is I camp out with the subject, in this case, Rayleigh scattering. I learn as much about it as I can. What else is it responsible for? Who is it named after? Who did he love? Whatever I can find that could become a great hook to bring in just the right person.” (“Why Do We Ask Questions?” 10:39 – 11:10) Just like the last statement, this statement solidifies his credibility through hard work to appeal to the largest audience possible. His hard work and dedication to expanding topics generate ethos for a wider group of learners. His thorough research into the topic also shows credibility through trust in teaching the correct information. These three statements demonstrate Michael’s use of ethos to gain trust, credibility, and appeal.

He uses these statements to allow the audience to regard what he says as the truth and make the audience comfortable receiving information from an experienced individual. This strategy is effective at giving Michael the ability to reach his audience even with some difficult philosophical concepts (“Is Your Red The Same as My Red?” 1 for example), back up his content on YouTube, and verifies his position as a credible source. This is extremely important for gaining a hold of the audience to regard himself as a credible source of information but also gain the flexibility to go off on tangents to fuel the curiosity of his audience to peruse knowledge.

Throughout the TED talk, Michael Stevens demonstrates the use of logos through the reasoning of going deep into a topic, logic in why we ask questions, and logic in his very creative teaching style. Right after Michael shares his personal experience in the public speaking tournament, he shares a couple of facts he has gained from that experience, “And I’ve learned two things from this. First of all, people love a good explanation. I mean they hunt them down. Even people who say they hate learning and that they hate books and all that stuff, they love explanations. Second of all, if you look closely enough and you take the time, anything can be interesting to anyone because everything is related in some way to something they care about.” (“Why Do We Ask Questions?” 7:10 – 7:37) From Michael’s previous experience in public speaking, he has gained two powerful insights about how people are motivated to and by explanations. He notices that *all people* seek explanations and that there is *always* something someone is interested in. These two bits of logic allow Michael to lay a foundation of the reasoning for his vast research into one topic. We also note, that Michael is using logos to give the audience a clear perspective to justify his unique teaching methods. A bit later in the TED talk, Michael states his main problem; get people interested in something they may think is

boring or trivial. Right after Michael describes this problem, he then states a solution to this problem, “In the 1950s, Harold Edgerton took a series of amazing pictures of nuclear explosions… His work attracted wider and new interest to physical phenomenon simply because he featured something that people couldn’t help but want to look at, a moment you couldn’t witness alone. He famously said, “the trick to education is to teach in such a way that people only find out they’re learning when it’s too late.” 2 Works for me.” (“Why Do We Ask Questions?” 12:59 – 13:54) Though Michael quoted a statement from an MIT professor, the meaning it carries means a lot in Michael’s case. Through the use of this quote, Michael utilizes logos to give his audience the truth behind why his videos are all over the place. Through logic, the audience can agree that they can’t fret over something boring if they don’t have an inkling of its presence. Michael is effectively using logos to show his audience that he adopted this teaching style to combat this problem and ultimately make his videos interesting for everyone. Afterwards, Michael recalled the hardest question for him to answer; “Are the colors I see the same as your colors?” Michael stated that, after that question, he started to retroactively think about why humans ask questions in the first place, “So I started looking more generally into questions. And the more I read about them and their history, the more I realized that questions might be quite unique to humans, apes that have been taught to use sign language can communicate with us… But an ape who knows sign language has never been observed to ask a question. Soliciting information from an organism belies this assumption that other organisms in some way have access to information that you don’t that they have different unique intentions or desires. It’s often called the theory of mind and it is incredibly difficult to show that animals have such a thing. But of course we intuitively feel that we do.” (“Why Do We Ask Questions?” 14:43 – 15:44) Michael shows a snippet of how the structure of human cognition allows us to be

inquisitive creatures. Using the facts about humans regarding others as repositories for knowledge, he can conclude that humans are natural question-askers. This unique perspective on why we ask questions in the first place shows why Michael enjoys and can create content for a never-ending demand, where there will always be people who learn something new from his explanations. Michael is effectively using logos to answer the main question of his TED talk, but to also give a clear reason why his career is effective. The three statements in this section perfectly depict how Michael uses logic and reason through logos to justify his work. Michael through reason into deep research, logic into why humans ask questions, and an explanation of why he has a creative teaching style gives him transparency and trust. In addition, his logically sound statements further improve his trust when he dives into a topic that is difficult to verify immediately. By logos Michael is creating a strong foundation for himself as a trustworthy speaker and creating a logically sound foundation for his career and its benefits.

Lastly, the quality Michael Stevens is most known for is his abundant use of pathos. His jokes and stories offer great leadups to complex questions, emotions and feelings that support his love for teaching, and relations to the audience as a down-to-earth individual. Michael Stevens opens his TED talk with several cheese puns as a smooth transition into his big question, “What is the best kind of cheese to use to catch a bear? Someone knows over here. Obviously the answer is “come here bear” Camembert! … I have a head full of cheese puns, but I was told to keep it ‘brie’-f… What can I say guys? I love a good pun. Why? I don't know; because puns are funny, right? Why? Well, because there is a bit of a surprise factor. You feel outsmarted for a second until you get the double meaning. Why? Because that's the way language works. OK. I get what these slides are doing. They’re playing the why game…” (“Why Do We Ask Questions?” 0:19 – 1:40) This quote shows Michael using cheese puns to directly interact with the audience but also to smoothly introduce the big question. Michael effectively uses pathos to draw in the audience with mutuality in humor but also as a segway to introduce “Why Do We Ask Questions?” in a subtle way to preserve the attention. He also uses humor to connect himself more casually to the audience which improves attentiveness and interest. We see the effect on the audience when the audience audibly guesses and laughs alongside Michael. Right after describing his youth in the public speaking tournament, Michael remarks about his appearance and feelings, “So some of the hairs here moved down here but other than that, I am the same guy. Seriously, still doing the same thing. To be at that tournament, and to see the expression on someone’s face win, they suddenly understand and are fascinated by something in the same way that you are is a phenomenal feeling.” (“Why Do We Ask Questions?” 6:42 – 7:10) In this quote Michael uses both a joke about his changed appearance and also the emotion of being in that tournament. Michael is using pathos to emotionally relate to the audience over time but also to express his love and passion for his career. This form of pathos also connects the audience to Michael through a similar experience. Michael is a more relatable figure when he describes his emotions in a way his audience can feel the same way about. The audience can regard Michael as a credible speaker because of the emotion and passion he shared from his youth that has remained through the present day. Lastly, at the very end of the TED talk, Michael wraps up the speech with some motivational words about question asking, “But we also ask questions because we can, because perhaps uniquely here on earth we know that other people can help. And that’s a great reason to ask more and more questions, to celebrate more and more whys. We all want to be kicked in the discovery. It feels great but we don’t all have a discovery in the same place. Taking the time to find where someone’s discovery is so you can give them a kick there isn’t just about whys, it’s also a very wise thing to do. And as always, thanks for watching.” (“Why Do We Ask Questions?” 16:38 – 17:18) In this final quote Michael is using all the other features shown in the TED talk to recursively conclude his speech. We see him recap using the main question, wordplay, and using his famous video ending words: “And as always, thanks for watching.” The pathos used here is exclusive to his content consumers, however, it is still a very important form of emotion. The nostalgia we get from hearing a content creator’s background music, introduction, and video structure gives the audience a sense of familiarity. By recapping in this way Michael is building an identity for himself that can be easily pointed out by the audience. In addition, Michael uses emotion to help his audience feel comfortable about asking questions by stating that other people can help. Michael’s abundant use of pathos has proven to be extremely effective not only in his TED talks but also in his YouTube channel with over 20 million subscribers. The use of jokes alongside serious topics brings a sense of personal connection to his viewers. This quality extends into how Michael presents himself and shapes his identity to become a unique figure in his field. This is a very important quality to expand his audience as well as hold onto them.

From analyzing the various rhetorical strategies Michael Stevens used in his TED talk “Why Do We Ask Questions?” we can see the impact he has on his content consumers. Michael’s ability to utilize ethos, logos, and pathos allows him to effectively persuade his audience to peruse knowledge and seek explanations. We see how Michael demonstrates ethos by providing his experience in youth and dedication to research to increase his credibility as a public speaker. Through justifications and sound logic about his teaching methods and deep research, Michael can gain the trust of his audience through logos. Lastly, we note Michael’s abundant use of pathos to share memories and humor to connect him with his audience on a personal level and create a unique identity, both of which allow his audience to become more comfortable and attentive. Through these three qualities, Michael Stevens is an accurate representation of a Rhetorical Superhero. His ability to teach while adding his own creativity allows him to influence his views for the better. Fascinatingly, due to his YouTube channel’s older videos, he can continue to influence new people way into the future. The presence of Vsauce on YouTube has also helped usher in many other influential science channels such as Action Lab, Veritasium, Steve Mould, Mark Rober, Smarter Every Day, etc. Michael Stevens has successfully left a positive impact that will continue to inspire curiosity and discovery through his clever use of rhetorical strategies. Thus, Michael Stevens is making learning impassioned, interesting, and iconic for all.

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