



## MEDIA

# A Kiss Is Just a Kiss, Unless It's an Ad for a Clothing Company

By JOHN KOBLIN MARCH 13, 2014

The email Tatia Pilieva sent to 21 people Monday morning started off the way such notes usually do when someone wants to get a link on Facebook.

“Hey my dears,” Ms. Pilieva wrote. “I wanted to share our little film with you.”

The email’s recipients had starred in a video that Ms. Pilieva had recently directed on a shoestring budget for a small clothing company.

The three-and-a-half-minute video, shot in black and white, showed 10 pairs of strangers kissing for the first time.

“Here are the links,” she wrote. “Feel free to share as you wish.”

That wish was the Internet’s command. By Thursday afternoon, the video — titled “First Kiss” — was a bona fide viral sensation.

A YouTube link had about 42 million views. A Vimeo link had been watched an additional 1.5 million times. (By comparison, President Obama’s appearance on the popular online comedy show, “Between Two Ferns,” posted Tuesday morning, had about one-third the traffic.) For the designer, it wasn’t exactly supposed to work this way.

Melissa Coker, 35, the founder and creative director of the clothing company Wren, commissioned the video to showcase her clothing line’s fall collection for Style.com’s Video Fashion Week. Style.com had created the video series for brands that might lack the financial wherewithal to put on a runway show during Fashion Week.

The video’s outrageous popularity had the web abuzz all week,

with some industry experts suggesting that it could force major designers to think more expansively about how to advertise future collections.

“She gets better attention here than an actual fashion show during Fashion Week,” said André Leon Talley, the artistic director at Zappos Couture, who used to be Ms. Coker’s boss at Vogue. “You can’t reach 40 million viewers in an 11- to 15-minute fashion runway presentation.”

But just as quickly as the video blew up, a negative reaction set in after viewers realized that some of those kissing strangers were modeling clothes for Wren. “That Adorable ‘First Kiss’ Video That Everyone Is Talking About Is a Fake,” said one headline at Complex.

It would not have been the first time that a heartwarming video ricocheted around social media only to be revealed as the work of corporate America. But the people behind this “First Kiss” video did not exactly seem practiced in the dark arts of web marketing.

“A friend called me up and said ‘You’re on the front page of Reddit,’ ” Ms. Pilieva said. “And I didn’t understand what that meant.” She had never heard of Reddit, a website known for minting viral hits.

And Ms. Coker said that there was no intention of hiding her company’s involvement. The video flashes “Wren presents” at the beginning and also mentions the company in the credits. “There was no part of it where this was a secret,” Ms. Coker said.

Wren, a seven-year-old label, is not exactly a fashion powerhouse.

The label, which is based in Los Angeles, has four employees, including Ms. Coker. The budget for the video was about \$1,300, with the money used for studio space, a video editor’s babysitting bill, lunch and “chocolate and some mints,” Ms. Pilieva said. The kissing strangers are friends of Ms. Coker and Ms. Pilieva’s. Many are musicians or models. All of them worked free.

The video begins with the 10 couples each facing off, some of them in awkward pas de deux. As the short film progresses, the couples kiss — a few of them passionately, some clumsily. But what was it that made it resonate with millions of drive-by clickers?

“It felt so real and sincere and it was,” Ms. Pilieva said, who noted

that each couple met for the first time the day they shot. “They shed all these layers in front of our eyes and in front of the cameras and that sweetness and kindness resonated with people.”

Ms. Coker said that there's been a “significant bump” in sales on Wren's online store since the video made its debut. And the song accompanying the video, Soko's “We Might Be Dead by Tomorrow,” sold 10,000 copies in North America on Tuesday and Wednesday. Her album also sold an additional 1,000 copies, said Bryan Ling, the co-president of Community Music, which licensed Soko's album in North America.

The exposure has had other perks for Soko. In addition to her song, she's featured in the video as well, the shorter of the two women kissing each other. (“If I'm going to kiss a stranger, I'd rather kiss a girl,” she said.) It turns out kissing a stranger with a camera rolling is a good way to meet someone.

“I did the video at 9 a.m. and had to kiss someone I didn't know,” she said. “It lasted half an hour and I went to get breakfast with her, and since we're friends. It's amazing.”

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