Going Viral: Factors That Lead Videos to Become Internet Phenomena

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Abstract

The author examined the top 20 viral videos as determined by Time Magazine. Each video's content was recorded for analysis of its main features. Eventually nine factors were deemed "important determinants" for a viral video: title length, run-time, laughter, element of surprise, element of irony, minority presence, music quality, youth presence and talent. This research is important because an understanding element within viral videos, such as "Charlie Bit Me," can help explain why they have become fixtures in today's popular culture. Likewise, understanding the prevalent elements within viral videos will allow for the prediction of which videos will become popular. This information will be useful for viral marketing campaigns.

I. Introduction

A recent article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* entitled "iPhone Subway Performance Goes Viral on YouTube" is a great example of the sometimes *unlikely* popularity of certain YouTube videos. The video featured in this article depicts a New York band playing one of its hit songs, *Take Me Out*, using only iPhones (iPhone, 2008). Although some may not find an iPhone concert entertaining, more than 2 million people have viewed this video on YouTube. It is important to note that this iPhone video is not alone in the spotlight. According to Burgess (2008), many seemingly insignificant videos have acclaimed worldwide fame. The large audience for these clips illustrates yet a larger phenomenon in the world of viral video: the apparent unpredictability of viral success. Why do some videos become wildly popular while others do not?

The objective of this research is to answer that general question by seeking to systematically discover commonalities among viral videos. By understanding the shared characteristics of viral video, one can more accurately predict which videos will become widely successful and why. This research can be very helpful in assisting companies with video marketing campaigns. For example, Old Spice's recent YouTube campaign has gone viral and has improved the brand's popularity among young consumers (Reiss, 2010). In order to continue to benefit from online video, companies such as Old Spice must isolate and perfect the recipe for creating effective viral content. Another goal of this research is to gain more insight into popular culture of the 21st Century. Many videos such as "Charlie Bit My Finger," have become household names. By understanding the reasons behind videos' successes, scholars will better understand the factors that lend themselves to today's popular culture.

Among Time Magazine's list of the top 50 viral videos of all time, there are clips of animals, dancing, singing, falling, and crying (just to name a few) (Fletcher, 2010). These clips also include many different types of people. It is important to note that simply because the content of these clips *seems* to be different does not

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rule out the possibility of common elements. In fact, this research seeks to draw connections between elements such as a video's presentation, run-time, content, and popularity. The research strategy was drawn from the work of many scholars in the field of online entertainment. Many of these scholars focused on how the YouTube platform encourages users to rate videos. Within this literature, there was found to be a lack of research on the subject of how videos become viral. This research builds upon previous scholarly work by expanding research methods to include the content analysis of viral YouTube videos.

II. Literature Review

Scholars argue that viral video is a new driving force of pop culture. Linkletter et al. (2009) claim the influence of online video is so strong; certain clips have persuaded people to take unhealthy risks. Burgess (2008) seeks to give meaning to these accusations by defining the parameters of a viral video. She argues that a viral video is born when user-led distribution causes a clip to become wildly popular. Furthermore, she claims that a viral video must contain some element that appeals to the popular culture of the time. Usually, this element of pop culture appeals mainly to the younger generation.

Although the influence of viral video has been researched extensively, much less attention has been given to the elements within viral videos. However, scholars such as Fletcher (2010) and Briggs (2010) have published works analyzing the reasons behind the popularity of certain videos. Briggs (2010) published a viral video case study in which he closely analyzes the "BlendTec Will it Blend" campaign. According to Briggs, this campaign has been wildly popular and is a useful example of the methodology behind viral videos. He explains that BlendTec has been successful in its online video endeavors because it created *buzz* content. He also argues that the irony of blending expensive objects in a blender is part of these videos' appeal. Burgess (2008) content surveyed a sample of 4,300 popular YouTube videos. Burgess notes that these videos are usually not traditional media content. She concludes that "oddness" and "amateurism" lead to the irony found in much of her sample size.

Another factor that scholars argue leads to the popularity certain videos is "layout." Hilderbrand (2007) argues that the site design of YouTube is much like that of television. YouTube allows the user to quickly move through videos by toggling arrow buttons. The interface also employs a large viewing area in the middle of the page. Hilderbrand argues that this quick viewing mechanism makes skimming videos easy. Users on YouTube can quickly move from video to video to find popular content. Hilderbrand also stresses the fact that many popular videos on YouTube have been aggregated from more conventional media sources.

Other researchers who have focused on the creative aspects of viral videos are Southgate et al. (2010). These researchers studied 102 video ads released in the United Kingdom. Their findings suggest that the creative details behind video advertising can be used to predict a video's popularity. Like Hilderbrand (2007), Southgate et al. (2010) argue that the presentation of videos is directly related to their popularity. Specifically, Southgate et al. (2010) focus on how visual branding drives a video's proliferation. Their research specifically relates to the advertising niche for viral video. In this way, the research of Southgate et al. (2010) and Briggs (2010) is closely related. Both researchers focus on the future potential of viral video in the realm of advertising.

A portion of the preceding research on the influence of YouTube has relied on anecdotal reports. For example, Rosenberg (2010) published an article profiling a university president's experience with viral video. He argues that this college president's YouTube fame is to be expected. By using this anecdotal evidence, Rosenberg (2007) was able to explain that viral videos are often results of their environments. He suggests that videos originating in well-defined social networks (such as universities) are destined to become more popular.

Several researchers have studied the link between news proliferation and viral video. Sagan et al. (2010) argue that viral video is changing the way people get their news. They include quantitative research to track people's reliance on video to get their news. They also suggest that newsworthiness is a factor in determining a video's viral capabilities. However, newsworthiness does not act alone in determining the popularity of a video. Sagan et al. (2010) suggest that a news video must also appeal to viewers in the 18-25 age groups to become widely popular. To support their findings, these researchers used evidence from the 2004 election in which online video feeds of the event received over 670 million views, mostly by younger

viewers. Another researcher who has written about the newsworthiness of viral videos is (Wallsten, 2008). He suggests that the blogosphere has attributed to the rise of many viral YouTube videos. He also argues that, because many people receive their news from online bloggers, the video posts of online bloggers become very important. Many viral YouTube videos have ties to popular blogs and commentary.

III. Methods

The purpose of this research was to determine the common elements of viral videos. This information could in turn, help predict which videos may go viral in the future. To determine the commonalities between viral YouTube videos, it was important to choose a sample for this study.

Sample: The sample size was obtained from Time Magazine's list of the top 50 viral videos (Time 2009). The top 20 videos on the list were chosen as the sample for the research (See Table 1 below for the complete list of video samples.)

Coding units: To remain consistent in the findings, each video was subjected to the same analysis. First, a pre-coding review was conducted with the last 10 videos on Time's list. From these videos, 7 common elements that manifested themselves in at least 30 percent of the pre-coding sample: Brevity, laughter, surprise, irony, and a short title, youth, talent, music, and minority presence. "Talent and "youth" were added as significant elements while coding the top 20 videos. Throughout this research the elements of "brevity" and "short-title" appeared as reasons for the proliferation of a video. However, in conducting the annotated bibliography, no information regarding the importance of surprise, irony, or laughter was discovered. The determinant of three words for the title was selected because 70% of videos in the coding sample had titles containing three words or less. The determinant of brevity (under 3 minutes) was chosen because half of the videos in the sample were under three minute run-times.

Coding protocol and categories: The first step was to evaluate each video in the sample in the same manner. A coding protocol was used to determine the common elements of viral videos. This research analyzed the content of the top 20 videos. In order to accurately evaluate the content, each video was watched twice. Each video was analyzed for the elements discovered in the pre-coding sample. The coding sheets for these videos were marked "yes" or "no" or "short" "long" based on the existence or nonexistence of each element.

- short title: If the title of the video was composed of three or fewer words, it was marked "s" for short. If it was longer, it was marked "l" for long.
- brevity: If the video was under two minutes it was considered brief
- laughter: If someone laughed in the first 30 seconds of the video it was marked with laughter
- surprise: If a person in the video appeared to be surprised it was marked surprise.
- irony: If part of the video exhibited something contradictory to societal expectations it was marked ironic.
- minority: If the video contained a person of ethnic minority status it was marked with minority.
- music: If the video contained a musical element it was marked musical.
- youth: If a person under 18 appeared in the video, the video was marked as having a youth element.
- talent: If the actions in the video seemed to require practice, the video was marked as requiring talent.

Observations were also recorded about each clip. By recording qualitative comments, the author was able to draw conclusions that they did not anticipate. This allowed them to discover unknown factors leading to the popularity of certain videos.

Table 1. List of sample videos.

No.	Videos ranked by Times Magazine
1	"Charlie Bit My Finger"
2	"Evolution of Dance"
3	"David After Dentist"
4	"Here it Goes Again"
5	"Rick Roll"
6	"Leave Brittany Alone"
7	"Don't Tase Me, Bro"
8	"Keyboard Cat"
9	"Dramatic Chipmunk"
10	"Hitler's Downfall"
11	"Flea Market Montgomery"
12	"United Breaks Guitars"
13	"Kittens, Inspired by Kittens"
14	"Potter Puppet Pals"
15	"Jill and Kevin's Big Day"
16	"Sneezing Panda"
17	"Otters Holding Hands"
18	"Literal Music Videos"
19	"OMG, Shoes"
20	"Baby Laughing"

IV. Findings

In order to establish the commonalities between viral videos, this study examined the top 20 YouTube videos as named by Time Magazine. During the coding of these videos, seven video elements were analyzed including: Title length, run-time, laughter, element of surprise, element of irony, minority presence, and musical quality. The study analyzed the overall percentage of "yes" to "no" in each category. In this way, it could be determined whether a video element had enough of a presence to be considered a viable factor. This coding method allowed for the discarding of several coding categories. Any factor representative of less than 25% of the sample group was ignored. Coding results and the percentage of each category are shown in tables 2 and 3 below.

Title Length:

In this study, a short title was considered to be composed of three words or less. Following the coding sheet, any title three words or less was marked "S" for short. Any video over three words was marked "L" for long. The results for this variable are as follows: 75% percent, or 15 out of 20 videos, had short titles. This

overwhelming proportion of short to long titles seems to reflect the pre-sample size used to format the coding sheet. The average title length in the sample was 2.76 words.

Run-Time:

The difference between long and short run-times was more subtle that in most other variables. A video's run-time was considered short and marked with an "S" if it was three minutes or less. Any video that ran over three minutes was considered long "L." The results for this variable are as follows: 60% or 12 out of 20 videos in the sample size were three minutes or less. The average run-time for all videos was 2 minutes and 47 seconds. The longest video in the sample was "Jill and Kevin's Big Day" at 5 minutes and 9 seconds. This video depicts a wedding party entering a church while dance to Chris Brown's song "Forever". The video with the shortest run-time was "Dramatic Chipmunk". In this video a Chipmunk turns its head while dramatic music is played.

Element of Laughter:

Within this study, a video was considered to have an element of laughter if someone was seen or heard laughing during the first 30 seconds of the clip. This criterion allowed for a simple "N" for no and "Y" for yes on the coding sheet. Laughter can sometimes be difficult to notice. For this reason, each video in the sample size was viewed twice. The results for this variable are as follows: Laughter was recorded in 30%, or 6 out of 20 videos. This means that 70%, or 14 out of 20 videos had no element of laughter. The video that exhibited the most visible was aptly named, "Baby Laughing". This video featured a baby boy being prompted by its parent to laugh for 1 minute and 40 seconds.

Element of Surprise:

A video was considered to have an element of surprise if someone in the clip made a visual or audible expression of surprise. For example, a video showcasing a practical joke in which the subject screamed would be considered to have an element of surprise. The results for this variable are as follows: 50% of videos had an element of surprise, and 50% of videos lacked surprise. The video with the most visible surprising element was "Don't Tase Me Bro". This video featured a shocked college student being tasered for raising his voice at a John Kerry speech.

Element of Irony:

Any video that displayed an element contrary to what was expected was considered to exhibit an element of irony. This variable was more difficult to measure, however, most videos analyzed seemed to display the breaking of social norms. In fact, this variable was the most present of all variables in this study. The results for this variable are as follows: 90% of videos, or 18 out of 20 videos exhibited an element of irony. 10% of videos or 2 out of 20 did not posses ironic elements. Because most videos exhibited some type of irony, it was difficult to differentiate between levels of this variable.

Ethnic Minority Presence:

Any video that displayed one or more people of ethnic minority status was considered to have a minority presence. The presence or lack of minority presence was recorded on the coding sheet by writing "N" for no and "Y" for yes. The results for this variable are as follows: 20%, or 3 out of 20, contained a minority presence, and 80% or 17 out of 20 videos, did not contain a minority presence.

Musical Quality:

Any video that displayed someone singing, contained background music, made references to a popular song, or was a music video was considered to have musical qualities. The lack or inclusion of musical qualities was recorded by marking "N" for no and "Y" for yes on the coding sheet. The results for this variable are as follows: 60%, or 12 out of 20 videos, contained musical elements, and 40% or 8 out of 20 videos, did not contain musical elements.

Youth:

The No. 1 video as determined by Time Magazine is “Charlie Bit Me.” This clip showcases two British brothers. The smaller brother bites the older on the finger. The older then exclaims (in a British accent), “Charlie bit me.” According to the research, 20% or 4 out of 20 videos, in the sample group displayed children seemingly under the age of 10. However, if the category of “children” is expanded to include all portrayals of participants up to 18 years of age, that number rises to 35%, or 7 out of 20 videos.

Talent:

Because talent is a relative term, this factor can be measured by estimating the level of practice needed for a performance. For example, when people dance or sing (seriously) in a video it can be assumed that the performance was pre-rehearsed. One of the most evident examples of pre-rehearsal in the sample was video number two, “The Evolution of Dance.” This video had a 6-minute run-time and consisted of one man dancing to 32 songs. It can reasonably be assumed that this performance took practice. The results for this variable are as follows: 30% or 6 out of 20 videos in the sample group were composed of songs, dances, or puppet performances requiring practice. Therefore, 60%, or 14 out of 20 videos were candid and did not require practice.

Table 2. Existence of Coded Elements by Video

No.	Length	Time	Laughter	Surprise	Irony	Minority	Music	Youth	Talent
1	L (4*)	S, 00:56**	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
2	S (3)	L, 06:00	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
3	S (3)	S, 01:59	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
4	L (4)	L, 03:05	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
5	S (1)	L, 03:32	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
6	S (3)	L, 04:36	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
7	S (3)	S, 02:12	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
8	L (4)	S, 02:23	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
9	S (2)	S, 00:54	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
10	S (2)	S, 00:05	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
11	S (2)	L, 04:00	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
12	S (3)	S, 02:02	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
13	L (4)	S, 01:31	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
14	S (3)	S, 02:37	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
15	L (5)	L, 05:09	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

16	S (2)	S, 00:16	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
17	S (3)	S, 01:41	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
18	S (3)	L, 05:33	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
19	S (2)	L, 04:00	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
20	S (2)	S, 01:40	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
	L=25%	L= 40%	No= 70%	No= 50%	No= 10%	No= 80%	No= 40%	No= 65%	No= 40%
	S= 75%	S= 60%	Yes= 30%	Yes= 50%	Yes= 90%	Yes= 20%	Yes= 60%	Yes= 35%	Yes= 60%
	Avg: 2.76 W	Avg: 2:42 M							

Note: * The Arabic number represents the number of words; ** Run time measured in minutes and seconds.

Table 3. Results by Percentage for Each Coding Category

Variable	Percentages
Title Length	Short: 75% Long: 25%
Run-Time	Short:60% Long: 40%
Element of Laughter	Yes: 30% No: 70%
Element of Surprise	Yes: 50% No: 50%
Element of Irony	Yes: 90% No:10%
Minority Presence	Yes: 20% No: 80%
Presence of Musical Qualities	Yes: 60% No: 40%
Youth	Yes: 35% No: 65%
Talent	Yes: 60% No: 40%

V. Analysis

The findings drawn from the video content analysis suggests there are a wide variety of factors that lead a YouTube video to become viral. Many findings of the study supported the author's earlier observation derived from the pre-coding sample. For example, the majority of the sample had titles of three words or less, had run-times of less than three minutes, and had musical qualities. This information reflects the widely held beliefs that people are more drawn to online content they can digest quickly. However, several of the factors on the coding sheet were found to be less applicable to viral videos. For example, there was no correlation recorded between "element of surprise" and a video's popularity. Fifty percent of the videos in the sample contained no element of surprise. In the sample there was only a low relationship between "minority presence" and popularity. This can be seen in the fact that 80 % of videos in the sample contained either no reference to or likeness of a minority figure.

Among the findings of this study were surprising relationships *between* the variables. For example, it was found that only 30 percent of the sample contained elements of laughter. This means that only 6 out of 20 videos portrayed someone laughing within the first thirty seconds. This finding is surprising considering the success of video number 15,"Jill and Kevin's Big Day," a video showcasing a an entire church laughing at a dancing wedding party. Although the factors of "surprise" and "irony" are different in nature, they are somewhat similar. Something ironic is usually surprising. However, according to this study, the existence of irony does not necessarily manifest itself physically. For a video in the sample to be considered to have an element

of "surprise," someone in the video had to appear visibly so. In contrast, 90% of the videos in the sample contained elements of irony. Irony was the variable recorded most frequently in this study.

Another strong, negative relationship was found between videos with elements of "youth" and "talent." Only 15% of videos in this study exhibited both elements of "youth" and "talent." Perhaps this is because much of the talent shown in these videos was acquired through years of practice. For example, the video "United Breaks Guitars" was a musical composition requiring knowledge of instruments. Therefore, it is no surprise that "talent" was recorded 83.33% percent of the time in videos that contained musical elements. This data suggests that videos containing music are usually of professional quality. It also suggests that people are drawn to both ends of the video spectrum. For example, videos containing "youth" elements were highly popular in this study. "Baby Laughing" was spontaneous and unplanned. This video of a baby giggling is one of the most popular videos on the planet. However, clips such as "Jill and Kevin's Big Day" required a great amount of practice and have also achieved wide popularity. This information suggests that people are drawn to the extremes of both candid and practiced content.

VI. Conclusion and Implications

The amount of research that has been conducted on viral videos reflects the media's newness. To this date, there has been limited research in the field of viral YouTube videos. This research paper sought to examine the commonalities of viral videos by content analyzing the top 20 YouTube videos as named by Time Magazine. The research conducted in this project reflects the idea that certain elements will make viewers more likely to recommend videos on YouTube. Although not every factor on the coding sheet was deemed highly influential, every factor recorded in the pre-coding sheet was later found present in the study.

This research could prove to be extremely useful for individuals hoping to relay messages through viral video. By understanding the most prevalent elements in viral videos, it is easier to create a video that will become widely distributed on the Internet.

Several limitations were encountered during the course of this study. Firstly, elements such as "minority presence", "irony", and "talent" are relative. Although parameters were set for each of these elements, they were subject to the coder's own perceptions. For example, the coder may consider a baby laughing to be ironic, while others would not. Likewise, coders may have different ideas of what constitutes "minority status". For a study such as this, a diverse set of coders is needed. Time constraints allowed for only one coder for this study. Therefore, time was a substantial limitation. Time Magazine's list of top viral videos was chosen to help narrow the research area. However, if time were not an issue, a sample population could be surveyed for their top viral videos.

This study identified several key factors for why a video becomes viral. However, this research did not address the path videos take to reach wild popularity. Because of this study's applicability to social media, the next step in this research will be examining the route a viral video takes on the web. Authors such as, Wallsten (2008) argue that much of the reason a video becomes popular can be attributed to its distribution through social networks. For this reason, continuing research on this topic should be combined with social media pathways. By understanding how and why a video becomes viral, and how social media promotes the medium, fabricating viral videos will become more of an art form than a guessing game.

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