

The Path from New to Viral: Understanding What Makes Videos Go Viral

Kathryn Vogelbacker¹, Xavier Dillahunt¹ and Denzel McCollum²

¹ University of Pittsburgh

² University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Abstract

Viral videos have become very popular and influential in our technology-driven world. They have a strong influence on the production of popular user generated TV shows and websites. Our team explored what makes videos to go viral. We aimed to understand the driving factors behind what makes a video go from one view to thousands of views. We focused particularly on comedic amateur videos that have gone from simply being posted to a social media sites such as YouTube to being aired on popular television programs like Tosh.O and Ridiculousness. We achieved our goal by performing a content analysis of viral videos, conducting a survey to viewers and organizing an interview with a viral video celebrity. Through our research we will present our project background, methodology on collecting data about viral videos, content analysis, and concluding factors in viral armature comedic videos.

Keywords: viral videos, social media, content analysis, survey study, internet

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Contact: kvogelbacker@gmail.com, xaviedillahunt@gmail.com, denzel.mccollum@gmail.com

1 Introduction

Viral videos are videos that have widespread popularity of at least 100,000 views by traveling from person to person through email, instant messages, and media-sharing websites (Wallsten, 2010). They have a strong influence on the production of popular user generated TV shows and websites. However, the factors that make a video more likely to go viral are often mysterious. The goals of our project were to increase our understanding of the mechanisms behind viral videos; and to learn the necessary factors for how one can attempt to make a video go viral.

Viral media continues to grow as a segment of the job market, as many companies, politicians, and organizations are taking advantage of user generated content to promote different products or brands. In recent years numerous companies have established a strong market presence in viral media marketing, such as YouTube, Reddit, CollegeHumor.com and funnyordie.com. These companies and organizations help create and promote viral media by allowing content to be shared in many different ways, across multiple online platforms. For example, on YouTube a user is able to email, post on Facebook, Tweet, and download videos. These options enable users to take advantage of simple and fast ways to share videos and content. Despite the widespread use and viewing of viral videos, the current literature does not address what factors contribute to video sharing. Wallsten (2010) confirms this by stating, “there has been almost no systematic empirical research on the factors that lead viral videos to spread across the Internet”.

This study focuses on comedic amateur videos that go from being posted without fanfare on social media sites like YouTube to being aired on popular television programs like Tosh.0 and Ridiculousness, or get posted to aggregator websites such as CollegeHumor.com and funnyordie.com. We focused our attention on comedy for three reasons. First, comedy is a way to have cross-platform mobility, and is a bridge between traditional media conglomerates/popular media norms and transgressive online material (Gurney). Second, a pilot investigation identified comedy as an important factor for many of the most-viewed videos on the

internet. Whether the comedy style is dry, sarcastic, goofy, political, informative, accidental, or eccentric, there is usually some form of humor involved in the internet's most viewed amateur videos. This is also supported in the literature as suggested by Gurney (2011), who highlights the importance of comedy in viral videos. Lastly, Tosh.0, Ridiculousness, Collegehumor.com and funnyordie.com are some of the most popular TV shows and websites watched and viewed daily. Their content is based off of amateur comedic videos that have gone viral through user generated content. People often like to share videos that they find funny or entertaining with everyone around them so that they can share in the joy (Berger and Milkman, 2009). Over the course of this study, we investigated what it took for a video to go viral.

2 Methods

To achieve the goals of our project we conducted a survey of viral video viewers, interviewed a viral video celebrity, and performed a content analysis of a sample of viral videos.

3 Survey studies

The purpose of our survey was to gain a better understanding of methods of video sharing, and also to research particular reasons behind the popularity of comedic viral videos among users of social media sites. We conducted our survey among undergraduate students aged 18 to 22. We chose this age group because of the groups familiarity with viral videos and the internet and because we had the most access to this group. Given the diversity of our research team, we were able to administer our survey on the campuses of four large public universities, in the southeast and mid-Atlantic. This allowed us to conduct our survey among a large sample of users with great diversity.

We employed snowball sampling as an approach to recruit our survey sample, starting with our personal networks and expanding the sample to those we did not know personally through friend of friend connections. We aimed to pass the survey around each campus through clubs, organizations, and sports teams. We also worked to recruit participants by posting advertisements in open public areas on our campuses. We administered the survey both online and in person to increase our response rate.

The survey included demographic questions such as age, race and gender. It also included questions about participants' habits regarding the ways in which they watch videos such as "Where do you watch videos?", "How do you share videos?", "How are videos shared with you?", and "How were you made aware of (specific video)?" We provided a sample of highly popular viral videos in our survey and asked participants whether they recognized the videos, if they had shared the videos and why, how many times they had replayed the videos, and what they liked about the videos.

These questions helped us gain more insight into video sharing behavior and understanding of the key factors that influence users to share or watch a video. The survey was conducted over a four month period in 2012.

4 Interview

To provide contextual understanding of viral videos from the creator's point of view, we conducted a semi-structured interview with Scarlet from the viral video "Scarlet Takes a Tumble". This interview was conducted to help understand the timing, platform of sharing, spread, purpose, reactions, and success of the original author of the video. The interview was conducted via email. Scarlet was more than happy to answer our questions and provided us with some interesting and surprising findings which are discussed further below. We chose to interview her because we wanted to understand how much of an impact the owner of a video has on it going viral and if an owner has any hand in keeping the video relevant and popular. One interesting answer she gave us was how exactly the video was placed on the web. She explained, "My sister told me to post it so she could watch it but set it to private so that only she would see it. I posted but I forgot to set it to private and it just blew up from there" (Renyolds, 2012).

5 Content analysis

There are many different factors that can potentially affect the popularity of a video on social media, including timing of video, design, content, shock factor, title of the video, and the method of distribution. In our research, we attempted to collect information about these factors by performing a content analysis of the videos to understand the factors that contribute the most to the popularity of a video. The content analysis involved two main phases. In the first phase we worked to examine a small collection of well-known viral videos to identify common features among them. In the second phase, we worked to examine a larger collection of viral videos to assess which features from the list created during the first phase were present in the videos in order to gauge the importance of each of factor. We looked to answer questions relating to the different aspects of the videos. These aspects included what site they were from, the creator's personal information, the video posting date, the video genre, and categories such as home videos of cute kids, pranks, political, or ignorant videos. We examined videos that had at least 100,000 views.

For example, we examined a specific parody video titled "Overly Attached Girlfriend". This short clip, created in 2012, mocked the idea of overly attached girlfriends to the background music of the popular Justin Bieber song "Boyfriend". The video went viral in a matter of days and was the spark of many other spin off viral videos and memes. We noticed that this video went viral as a result of a few very important factors. Video sharing via social media and the creator's own response to the videos seem to be two important factors that contributed to the video going viral.

6 Results and Conclusion

We identified several factors associated with the viral sharing of amateur comedic videos. These factors include: shock factor, ability to parody, target audience, timing, relevance of topic, and popularity of the initial sharer. Based on the current literature, we focused our attention on comedic videos. Berger and Milkman (2010) concluded the "emotional engagement" of the audience is a key to the virality of any online video. That is to say, videos must be able to elicit some type of emotional response in the viewer in order for it to achieve viral status. Berger and Milkman found that videos that elicited sadness were shared less often than those videos which elicited happiness and anger. When videos evoke anger, viewers want to share their outrage. When videos cause viewers to respond with a combination of emotions--for example humor and shock--they are more likely to be shared.

In addition to the importance of comedy in viral videos, Gurney (2011) highlights how the structure of the videos, such as the ease at which users can remix or parody the content, plays a key role in their popularity. The ability to parody is important because users will share the parodied version with friends. Then after the parody is viewed friends will refer back to the original increasing the number of views. Another factor that is important to consider, when making a viral video, is popularity and reputation of the initial sharer. Popularity and reputation of the sharer serves as the medium between the creator and the viewers. If the sharer does not have a big enough viewer audience then the video is less likely to reach viral status. Also, if the initial sharer is not well respected by their viewer audience people are more likely to not watch or think the video is spam. Relevancy and timing are factors that can play a role in a video achieving viral status. Videos focus on events that currently happening or particular seasons we found were more likely to gain more views. For example, if someone makes a humorous video involving politics during election time the video stands a better chance of going viral. Another example is a someone who creates a Christmas or Thanksgiving themed video during the holiday season. As long as the video is related to something that is relevant the video will draw attention from viewers.

In conclusion, although all videos do not possess every one of the factors listed those possessing one or more likely to go viral. The highest viewed videos possess combinations of the factors identified in our study.

7 References

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