Viral Video Group Project - Persuasion in a Digital Age

Persuasion Group Research Project and Presentation

Viral videos have come to fill many roles in our popular consciousness. Sometimes they are popular entertainment. Sometimes they are about current issues and affairs. Sometimes they are public service announcements or educational in nature. Whatever point of view they are spreading, it is clear that these videos have more and more influence over popular consensus.

In the context of this current class, we will look closely at how they can be used as a form of persuasion - what kinds of messages can be spread by viral videos and how effective are they as a persuasive tool? How do they function in proving a point or changing people's conceptions?

Whatever they are, and however they do it, viral videos capture the popular attention. Each share generating more shares. As an increasingly networked public, we pass on these videos and the issues they represent. What makes a video go viral? Can we predict it? What is the formula?

These questions are difficult to answer, and for every viral video, there are likely many videos that live on Youtube in obscurity.

There are certainly cues to watch for and popular memes to hook into when trying to make a video "go viral". Topics of the day can make a video pertinent even after it was made. Social issues can make videos meaningful in debate and discussions.

So let's take a look at the making, the hoped for results, and the sometimes unintended phenomena that are viral videos.

History:

What really sets viral videos apart from "popular" videos of the past is the methods in which they are distributed to the audience. In many ways this is the great promise of digital media and the networked public.

In more traditional media, video was broadcast to viewers along set distribution networks - a television station, a movie theater, a video tape. A video could be popular, but was still only going to spread within the confines of the medium it was being shown in.

These days media can be distributed in two important new ways:

1. Searching - Viewers can now actively look for and find information that is pertinent and relevant to them and the issues of the day. These searches are also often interconnected... so a search or a video may well call up related searches or videos which lead users in one direction or another.

2. Shares - Media can be shared almost effortlessly from person to person and to multiple people - and even to people that do not know each other. It is this networked and interactive nature of new media that has unleashed the potential for videos to spread beyond the expectations of their creators. Once media is digital there are very few barriers to sharing it, and if it catches the attention of people that pass it to other people in their network, a video can be spread through very large audiences in a short span of time. The results are not always positive (see the ethics section below) but the powerful influence of a viral video is hard to do.

Westerman and Skalski stated in Computers and Telepresence. A Ghost in the Machine? that: "The main characteristic of the Internet that specifically increases the possibility for presence is the highly interactive nature of the medium."

The information and ideas (content) communicated continue to help build common ground and community goals. As the channels for sharing media grow, we are seeing very specific interactive communities develop around the visual media itself. These are communities of shared experience. These are discussions that can involve large numbers of people from anywhere in the world.

These channels are no longer just a place to see and hear something. They are also a place to comment, discuss and share the images. To pass the feeling on to a larger community.
Factors that Lead Videos to Become Internet Phenomena

Exams...
Jenkins (2011) performed a similar study but instead of examining the influence of emotional content on the transmission viral news content, this research study examined the transmission of viral video ads and the influence of emotional content. Similar to Berger and Milkman (2011), it was also found in this study that viral videos with positive emotional content tended to become viral to a greater degree than those with negative emotional content. Of the videos examined it was found that all of them used either surprise, joy or humor in their emotional content. Indicating that within the ad industry there is already an understanding that positive emotional content sell better than negative emotional content. In regards to creative strategy, Jenkins (2011) found that the most successful of viral marketing strategies was user involvement. This again can be related to previous research by demonstrating that to go viral a message must elicit commitment from the audience either through a physiological arousal reaction or through investing the viewer into the content of the message. As mentioned by the researcher in the discussion, humans in general seek to experience positive emotions and as such they will be motivated to share these experiences with others. This relates to previous research by Berger and Milkman (2005) which found that people share content to deepen social connections. It is reasonable to assume then that people, knowing they prefer positive emotional states, will transmit content with a positive emotional message to their friends with the expectation that they will also enjoy the positive emotional tone of the content and thus deepen the social connection between the parties. In relation to Berger and Milkman (2011), this study provides evidence that the transmission of content based on its emotional tone is similar across different mediums.

Contagious Memes, Viral Videos and Subversive Parody: The Grammar of Contention on the Indian Web
Having examined the general characteristics of viral videos and the which helps transmit them it is necessary to examine whether or not this holds true in other cultures. In this essay the author explores the transmission of viral videos featuring political parody and satire. The author describes the pre- and post- colonial history of India and details the rise of viral videos on the Indian web. The use of parody and satire in political videos has recently become very widespread in India. The videos tackle controversial issues like women's safety, arranged marriages, and sex-education in schools. On video in particular, "It's Your Fault" criticizes the patriarchal nature of Indian culture and has received 4 million views. As mentioned earlier in the first article we examined it is notable that the title for this video is short (three words or less). This video is also an example of a controversial video using activity charging negative emotional content. The theme of "It's Your Fault" is satire against a culture of victim blame, in the move an actress informs women that rape is their fault and lists various reasons why this is so, including wearing provocative clothing and remaining out late at night. Obviously this list is meant to parody the excuses that patriarchal societies make when blaming rape victims but the message itself is also meant to arouse anger in the audience and thus motivate them to share and discuss the topic of women's safety. This article also demonstrates the earlier finding about length of video names in two other instances. In one video titled "Thank You Congress" a fake eulogy is given for congress members voted out of office in recent elections. Again we observe that the title is only three words long. In another video titled "Congress vs BJP" the video satirizes peoples obsession with politics by showing people committing errors at work because they were distracted discussing politics. Lastly in the discussion section the author makes not of how humor has been successfully employed to discuss serious issues that people would usually shy away from. In the words of Kumar (2015) the message..."masks itself in as a joke and challenges hegemonic narratives by unraveling the mask to reveal its critique". In relation to what has been discussed so far this paper demonstrates that traits of viral videos found in western studies hold true in an eastern setting. The length of the video title and the presence of positive as well as negative emotional content that increases subject activation (physiological arousal) levels predicts the ability of a video to go viral in a similar fashion to a western setting.

Contagious Memes, viral videos and subversive parody.pdf

Creative Determinants of Viral Video Viewing

Southgate, Westoby, and Page (2010) examined the creative determinants linked to the viewing of 102 video ads from the UK and US. Specifically they examined 5 hypotheses and found 4 of them to be significantly correlated with the status of viral videos. The first hypothesis was that established creative drivers positively predicted online viral viewing volume. This hypothesis was broken down into 4 sub-variables; enjoyment, involvement, branding, and awareness index (branded ad efficiency). Three of these four sub-variables (enjoyment, involvement, and awareness) were moderately correlated with viral video status. This further reinforces the notion that positive emotional content and activation (involvement and awareness) of the audience are key factors in achieving viral status. The second hypothesis was that distinctiveness positively predicts online viral viewing volume. This was correlated at the .46 level at p = >0.001. In simpler terms this means the the uniqueness of the video was a contributing factor in its popular rise. The third hypothesis examined in this study was that celebrity popularity was positively predictive of online viral viewing. This was found to be moderately correlated (0.31 and .43 among celebrity specific advertizements). This demonstrates another aspect of viral videos which has not yet been examined. Familiarity and recognition of something familiar in the content of a video can contribute to it going viral. This however may also be confounded by other variables such as youth presence and ethnic minority presence however for the purposes of our examination of the topic celebrity popularity will suffice as a general variable. The fourth and final hypothesis that was confirmed was that likelihood to forward (buzz) positively predicts online viewing volume. This is related to the idea of activation and arousal but in this instance the researchers are examining a self-reported behavioral action instead of the cognitive change that is causing the transmission. Lastly the only hypothesis to be rejected due to insignificance was that category and brand involvement positively predict online viral viewing volume. From what has already been examined this should come as no surprise. It is the content of the message that matters not simply the image attached to it. Otherwise household name brands would not spend millions of dollars devising new advertizing
strategies; the product would simply sell itself through brand recognition.

### Table 1: Correlations between Link™ measures and YouTube views per week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Correlation ($r$)</th>
<th>$N$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1: Established creative drivers positively predict online viral viewing volume</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>0.058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Branding</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness Index (branded ad efficiency)$^1$</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>102$^2$</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.43 among celeb ads)</td>
<td>(23 with celebrities)</td>
<td>(&lt;0.001)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4: Claimed likelihood to forward (buzz) positively predicts online viral viewing volume</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5: Category and brand involvement positively predict online viral viewing volume</td>
<td>0.14/0.13</td>
<td>75/74</td>
<td>Both &gt;0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^1$ As an extension of H1, we also explored whether the correlation with viral viewing could be improved using a reconfigured version of the branded advertising efficiency (Awareness Index) measure. We did not find a re-formulation of this measure that significantly improved the correlation, hence the established Awareness Index algorithm remains valid.

$^2$ The celebrity correlation across all cases treats no celebrity presence as a zero value.

**creative determinants of viral video viewing.pdf**

### Seeding Viral Content

Research by Thompkins (2012) examined the seeding strategies of YouTube videos that go viral. The authors examined the dissemination over time of 102 YouTube videos. Results indicate that two factors are especially important when selecting the initial "seed" group to spread the video. In the research the term "seed" is used to indicate the initial customers who will spread the video. Results indicate that when selecting a group it is important that customers who have a strong influence on others, rather than just wide range of social influence, are selected. It is further desirable that the group is only moderately homogenous so that there is room for the video to spread beyond the confines of one specific group. A message that is disseminated to a wide audience in a homogenous group with little influence is not likely to achieve viral status. The main take away from this research is that the message must be seeded to a group that is likely to influence (or activate) others in such a way that the message will continue to spread outside of the initial group. Likewise a somewhat diverse group is needed (in regards to interests and social circles) to ensure that the video will reach a broader audience after its initial transmissions. Lastly, the author notes that while the seed groups are important a message will ultimately succeed or fail based on the content and quality of its message. Choosing the right seed strategy can help a good video go viral but it cannot reliably help a bad video do so. The implications of this research demonstrate that there is more at work than just the content of a message that decides whether it will go viral. The delivery method must also be thought out somewhat to maximize the chance to spread the video.

**Seedng viral content.pdf**

### The Key Elements of Viral Advertising

In this study, conducted in Spain, the researcher employed a less intensive research of the emotional content of Spanish viral videos. Though limited in its results this study found that similar to West (2011) viral videos typically contain a positive emotional message (in this study 92% did) or an element of surprise (heightened state of physiological arousal). This study again demonstrates consistency of content characteristics across cultures. For added validity it is interesting to note that the researcher in this study did not reference the studies of West (2011) or Berger and Milkman (2011) indicating that they arrived at their results and conclusions relatively free of outside influence from previous research on the topic.

**The Key Elements of Viral Advertising.pdf**

### Examples of Viral Video - seeing is believing:

**Getting out a peripheral message: Many video persuade by association.**

When an institution looks to enhance their image, they have many traditional tools - commercials, presentations, booklets and hand-outs. But increasingly, we are also seeing institutions put out video news, features and even entertainment in an effort to "get their name out there" and
become a brand that people think well of. RIT does this as well, putting out numerous videos about events, visitors, achievements and activities at the school - in the hope that this will translate into good-will and brand recognition.

A recent example involves a small day school in Rhode Island - the Moses-Brown School. The video was a parody of the (in)famous Disney movie song “Let it Go”. It was used by a small school to announce that "School is Closed" when they had a big winter snow storm. They did the video in advance and had it ready to send out the first time they cancelled school.

Planning makes any video better - and raises the chances that it will go viral. The conception and production process plays an important role in many videos.

Here is a link to an interesting interview about the process of making a video that - we now know in hindsight - went viral. There was a lot of good planning and ideas that went into this one, but a fairly simple (and cheap) production paid off handsomely for the people that made it.

http://artery.wbur.org/2015/01/26/moses-brown-snow-day

The video itself can be seen here:

The video gained nationwide attention and was reported on by numerous mainstream media, including Time and ABC. It currently has over 3.6 million views.

Why did it work for them? They capitalized on a reliable combination of pop culture (the "Let It Go" song had already reached a fantastic level of popularity), and parody of authority figures. Student love to see their authority figures act the buffoon. Singing a song normally popular with young girls is made deliciously ridiculous when a male authority figure sings it - turning the tables and providing for sustained silliness. Finally, adding to it all is the pure joy that many people - especially students - feel when they hear that school is cancelled.

It would be interesting to learn more about what they did as far as placement of the video, whether they relied on organic sharing or paid for placement and promotion of the post.

This attempts to persuade by using a Narrative Paradigm approach - without coming straight out and saying it, the video communicates that the school is a fun, caring institution where the top administration is approachable and in tune wit young people. The organic spread of this video brought the Moses Brown school to the attention of a much larger audience than a traditional paid commercial would have, and because it is clearly not a traditional paid commercial, it presents as being much more authentic and genuine. This video most likely had a very noticeable and direct impact on the number of applicants the school is receiving for this coming year.

Amateur Video as news, viral video as breaking news:

Another recent example of a viral video comes to us from news and current events.

During the recent Baltimore riots one video seemed to have attracted the most attention - not only from people on both sides of this divisive issue, but from many who looked at it purely from a family/parenting perspective.

The video report from CNN can be seen at this link: http://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2015/04/30/ac-cooper-intv-slap-mother-son-part-1.cnn

This is an example of a video that clearly involved no preparation - in fact the principle characters in it were not even aware that it was being filmed. It is not professionally filmed (the video is amateur video filmed on a cell phone), but what drives the wide ranging popularity and curiosity about it is the content.

The “success” of this video is driven by the conflicting but understandable human emotions involved between a protective mother and her adolescent male child. Whatever a viewer's opinions on the riots and the rioters, the emotional charge of a mother protecting her wayward son from doing something dangerous - regardless of his teenaged hubris - is something most of us can identify and relate with. Then again, others might argue that if she routinely resorts to violence in disciplining her son he may have learned that that was an acceptable way to resolve differences. In any case, people on both sides of this discussion posted and share the video to try and communicate their points of view.

Amateur video like this is increasingly presented as highly persuasive evidence of right or wrong doing. Video can give a more objective perspective on highly charged incidents. Because the audience can see the actions themselves, they can draw their own conclusions from it. An important persuasive aspect of these kinds of amateur video news clips is actually in the posting and sharing process. By making the evidence available in the first place, people can help to propagate their understanding of the truth. People post and share images and videos that they feel will amplify or spread their own point of view. Perhaps they post a video to try and right a wrong.

Another strong and current example includes recent citizen video of a shooting incident might counter the testimony of people involved and allow juries to consider information beyond that provided by the survivors. In effect a video like that can be powerfully persuasive - it can help speak for the dead person about his/her actions and or guilt (or lack of it).

Viral Video with a cause:
Share a message to a wide range of people and you may help effect change or break-throughs.

Another great example from last year of a viral appeal - in the form of a public service announcement with a twist - is the "Ice Bucket Challenge" which tried to raise awareness and funds for research and support into the causes of Lou Gehrig's Disease... the symptoms of which resemble being dosed by a bucket of ice-water.

According to the ALS Association (in April of 2015) "... an international sensation started in the Northeast part of the United States, whereby people poured buckets of cold ice water on themselves while challenging friends and family to spread ALS awareness via a shared video. The viral phenomenon, known as the Ice Bucket Challenge, has brought in more than $220 million around the globe for the fight against ALS. $220,000,000 is a lot of money to persuade a wide spectrum of people to donate. The idea of this video, like many traditional fund-raisers and tele-thons was to persuade viewers and participants to take an interest in raising money for the cause, but the genius of it was in getting them to do something that went viral. If this video had just been a "one-off" with a person pouring ice on themselves, it probably would not have had very much impact. But by "challenging" people to share the actions and the videos the video started to spread and people had a vested interest in helping them spread.

One more video about a cool high school musician teacher:

This video appeared this year and has 12,680,561 viewers as of today. It is one inspiring video showing students having fun in their music class with their teacher. It is a great video to "draw" other students to attend the school.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EUEg7kd6Cg

At its best, viral video is about participating in something. It is about a shared experience.

Viral videos has an entertainment marketing and promotional tool

A type of viral video that have surface in the last few years has focus it's aimed at promotion, so it they fall under the category of viral marketing, this videos have been an effective means to promote entertainment products, specifically for movies. Marketers are creating and planning viral videos for marketing campaigns to promote movies, in hopes of it going viral in social media. The biggest trend right now is what it’s called "prankvertising" were the filming of a prank that is directly related to the promotion of a movie is distributed online. These are all examples of carefully executed viral videos with a promotional intentions behind them.

Examples of videos used as promotional tools which went "viral":

A telekinetic Surprise in a Coffee Shop

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VlOxlSOr3_M

An adaptation of Stephen King’s horror classic “Carrie” gained a lot of buzz when its promotional campaign became a viral hit, it received over 4 million hits in a single day. The agency Thinkmodo, who also created the viral hits iPad Head Girl, the Shaving Helmet and Time Square TV Hack created the video. The promotional prank call “Telekinetic Coffee Shop Surprise” recently has more than 60 million viewers, in the clip costumers of a coffee shop in New York City witness a teenage girls meltdown when she unleashes “telekinetic powers” on someone who accidentally spills her coffee on her computer. Sony’s savvy promotional video was a big hit, and it cracked YouTube year-end list of trending videos.

Devil baby attack

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUKMUZ4tIeg

Another video by the talent behind “Telekinetic Coffee Shop Surprise” Thinkmodo, is a viral video called “Devil Baby Attack” this video has more than 50 million hits on YouTube since its release on January 14, 2014 and it was able to raised big awareness for the small-budget horror film Devil's Due. The video stars a realistic animatronic demon baby in a carriage that scares people in the streets of New York. The video appeared in every social media platform upon its release, including Facebook, Twitter, and various blogs.

A viral campaign not only can generate buzz, but can also draw audiences to films. This efforts are a perfect example of a viral marketing video powerful force when it is strategically done.

Viral video as cultural modifiers

When a video goes viral it creates a reverberation of information on the web, this is why some of them can easily incorporate themselves into society, informing how people think, speak or feel about a specific subject. Two examples of viral videos that became a part of popular culture through catch phrases are:

- Ain't nobody got time for that by Kimberly “Sweet Brown” Wilkins.

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nh7UgAprpdM

“Ain’t nobody got time for that!” is a viral YouTube video originally aired on Oklahoma City NBC, affiliate KFOR-TV, it was a news report that featured an interview with a woman that survived a fire in an apartment complex. The video quickly went viral, its famous catchphrase “Ain't
nobody got time for that!” became a popular sensation, her other phrases “Ran for my life,” and “Oh, Lord Jesus, it's a fire!” also became quite popular inspiring memes, promotional materials, spoofs, and songs. It garnered Sweet Brown many TV appearances, including a visit to ABC’s the view and a cameo in a Tyler Perry movie. “Ain’t nobody got time for that” currently has more than 57 million views.

- Charles Ramsey Interview

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axCn04iXkBg

Another example of a news report interview going viral was the Charles Ramsey Interview. Charles Ramsey became a hero when he rescued a woman that was being held captive for ten years. Ramsey’s interview went viral, and deliver a famous catchphrase “Dead Giveaway” which has become part of popular culture, and urban slang. This interview transformed Ramsey into an instant celebrity, he appeared in several television shows, news channels, magazines and newspaper articles.

This two news interviews exemplify how a viral video can become part of popular consciousness and deliver materials that can become part of the cultural vernacular.

Theories:

From the research literature some general theories of how viral content spreads emerge. The research demonstrates that viral videos are created through the influence and interaction of several variables. These variables include the content of the message, the emotional tone of the message, the audience that receives and spreads the message, and the uniqueness of the message. Several other variables also influence the spread of viral content to a lesser degree including brand awareness and celebrity presence. In short viral content tends to spread best when the following conditions are met. First the content should include many or all of the following elements; it should have a short title length (three words or less), a short run-time (5 minutes or less), laughter present, an element of surprise, an element of irony, a minority presence, quality music, and a youth presence. The emotional tone of the video should be positive (happy or awe inspiring) and contain an emotional stimulus that will activate the audiences physiological arousal (activity). Even a video with a negative emotional tone can go viral if it can positively activate the audience (anger motivating people to action for example). Viral content should be unique and show an element of creativity. To improve the odds that a video will go viral it is necessary to select the right initial (seed) audience to spread it. This audience should be somewhat diverse and have a great degree of social influence among their peers. In this way the initial group spreads the content to others and influences those people to further spread the message.

Understanding how viral videos can be persuasive is an important goal of this group project. Above we see four different videos which all went viral. All of them have elements of persuasiveness to them and have greatly extended the reach of their message by “going viral”. Simply achieving mass distribution does not necessarily mean that the video is persuasive. It could be argued that many videos do not have a message or a point of view. But when there is a message - even a subtle one - and it gets distributed to millions of people, the cumulative impact of that message can be quite large.

We have discussed several series of frustration, and there are many others that we have not covered in this class. Choose one or two theories that you feel are most applicable to understanding this phenomenon. Present a brief overview of the theory and draw relationships between the theory and the topic. The application of theory is important as it provides us with the foundation for understanding and further exploration.

Advice:

If our team was a group of consultants charged with advising a marketing and advertising agency with the goal of helping them to be more persuasive with their media campaign we would try to capitalize on the strengths of the school to get the word out. We would want to show more about our topic and how our strengths could persuade other strong inquisitive innovators to come to the school. We would create a product that draws people to come to Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). Here is a poster product that we would use to persuade students/adults to come to RIT.
We might also highlight some of the school's programs using video in the hope that they might get traction outside the immediate school community - thereby growing the school's reputation as a leader in innovative tech.

One current and popular example of this, from RIT, is a reasonably successful video about cheap prosthetic arms made using 3D printers and given to children who lack hands or limbs. This video hits on a few different levels - community involvement, helping disabled children, cool cutting edge technology... but, importantly, the project has its roots at RIT - so the video can be used in the narrative paradigm to associate RIT with positive "feel-good" messages of technology and community involvement.

This is exactly the kind of feeling that a school specializing in technology would want to be associated with.

You can see the video here:

**Ethics:**

The ethical concerns and considerations that a receiver of persuasion and a center of persuasion should consider when engaged in persuasion related to my topic would be that we need to be considerate of if it is ethical or unethical. For example, according to https://www.boundless.com/communications/textbooks/boundless-communications-textbook/persuasive-speaking-14/introduction-to-persuasive-speaking-72/the-ethics-of-persuasion-286-4177/ website, it is unethical if it is for personal gain. "At the expense of others or for personal gain without the knowledge of the audience".

As you can see, not all persuasion is ethical.

For example, one person could make a video/vlog saying they are fundraising for a summer camp which they claim they are going to be attending. Behind the scenes, it's not real. They are just keeping money for themselves because they need money. (This is a great example of unethical behavior.)
There are positive and negative impacts from viral videos. The potential to share information and influence people is exponentially larger than it has ever been, but whether we construct positive messages or negative messages has more to do with the content than it does the medium of distribution.

What's next?

While we do not yet have a "crystal ball" that can visualize the future, we can observe emerging trends in communication technology to better predict where visual communication is heading. Regardless of the industry, whether it is cinematography, advertising, business, or education, the use of video is expected to skyrocket over the next several years. Bodomo (2009) explains that in today's society, we now have new technologies emerging every month to better communicate our messages and as these messages become more media rich and interactive they are likely to become more impactful - and be shared more. There has been a large paradigm shift to the delivery and use of videos to better express our messages to their intended audience. For example, some of these emerging patterns are the switch from traditional videos to live video (as in Periscope and Meerkat which allow users to effectively broadcast live from their smart phones), and the growth of immersive 3D virtual environments.

References and Links:

- Dafonte-Gómez, A. (2014). The key elements of viral advertising: from motivation to emotion in the most shared Videos. *Comunicar, 22*(43), 199.