

Strong Emotion a Driving Force Behind “Viral” Content

BY JEWEL MELVIN

Every marketing business magnate—as well as YouTube star-wannabe—would pay dearly for the secrets that would lend their online excursions the mass audience legitimacy that going viral creates. They may not need to wait any longer.

Most of us have heard of seemingly random online content that has gone viral, from Rebecca Black's “Friday” YouTube music video, with over a million dislikes and views, to The New York Times article, “For the Love of Money,” by Sam Polk. Fifty-nine percent of those polled said they had shared online content with others, such as emailing, re-tweeting, or re-blogging. To businesses, this is an important aspect of modern-day marketing, impacting companies' profitability and image as well as consumers' decision-making and attitudes.

A new research article by professors Jonah Berger, Ph.D., and Katherine L. Milkman, Ph.D., of the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, focuses on three original research studies and has important implications on effectively determining what makes something go “viral,” as well as significance for the fields of marketing and social diffusion (how new information and ideas are spread throughout social structures and society).

The 2012 study, titled “What Makes Online Content Viral?,” published in the Journal of Marketing Research, explores the variety of reasons people share online content, including to convey information, self-image enhancement, emotional experiences, deepening social connections, and to generate a social exchange. The study further explores viral content's characteristics, and how and why these characteristics, such as emotion, determine “virality.”

The first study analyzed all online articles from The New York Times within a three-month period (7000 articles), for their popularity through “virality”—in this case how often an article appeared on the top New York Times 15-minute email reference list. Valence—an article's

perceived positivity or negativity—and different emotions were also examined to determine their effect on virality. The second and third research experiments tested the causal effects of high and low- arousal differences, respectively, on other types of written content such as advertising and negative customer service experiences (study 2) and a woman with an injury (study 3) giving factors by which to compare the results of each study.

After controlling for content such as whether an article is interesting, surprising, or useful, or attention-getting variables such as an author's fame, article placement, and article release time in the first study, the researchers found that arousal—bodily elevated states of heightened perception and feeling—was more influential in article virality than valence. Results indicate that “positive content is more viral than negative content,” which, according to Drs. Berger and Milkman, rebuts the old wives' tale that negative news is more likely to be shared than positive news. However, negative high-arousal content is also high in virality. This is because all the studies found that content high in generating emotional arousal such as anger (negative emotion), anxiety (negative emotion), awe (positive emotion), and amusement (positive emotion) saw high circulation and rater interest, while low-arousal inducing articles evoking sadness (negative emotion) produced less interest and were circulated less often, since heightened arousal levels increase action, while low-arousal levels lessen or de-activate action.

Viral articles generally are disseminated only once, and are sent to friends, family, and other acquaintances; articles sent to individuals were more personalized, while articles sent to large groups (such as email lists and Facebook wall posts) tended to confirm that high-arousal content was more likely to be shared.

Rather than only transmitting articles based on the social benefits sharing provides, people often spread very emotionally arousing content, presumed to be more reflective of the transmitter's internal state. Advertising, such as an article's location in a newspaper or website, does affect user's attention and consequently virality, although the results suggest that the content of the

articles are equally important factors that determine whether or not readers will disseminate the article.

Marketers, journalists, bloggers, and ad campaign directors may find this research useful when deciding what material to include in ad campaigns, news articles, public health campaigns, or blogs, for maximum sharing impact. Drs. Berger and Milkman state "while negative emotions may hurt brand attitudes, some negative emotions can actually increase social transmission," such as high-arousal emotions. These research findings may help marketers to formulate pricing, such as "charging more for content more likely to be shared," Drs. Berger and Milkman postulate, as well as what emotion activation to include when designing content or choosing what content to feature to boost views or improve customer sentiment. Additionally, Drs. Berger and Milkman suggest that "it may be more beneficial to focus on crafting contagious content" rather than utilizing opinion leaders (certain people who are perceived to have greater influence on others) to generate word-of-mouth advertising. Drs. Berger and Milkman conclude that "it is important to consider the underlying individual-level psychological processes that drive social transmission when trying to understand collective outcomes. The emotion (and activation) that content evokes helps determine which cultural items succeed in the marketplace of ideas."