Conversations Sell: How Dialogical Judgments and Goals Underpin the Success of Viral Videos

T. E. Dominic Yeo, University of Cambridge, UK

Three studies demonstrate that the buzz over viral videos has more to do with individuals' motivation to create conversations about them than what they actually contain. Using the example of the "Bus Uncle" viral video, this paper illustrates how goals and shared cognition drive "virality."

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T. E. Dominic Yeo, University of Cambridge, UK

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The potential for online videos to command widespread attention without the need for extensive resources or interference from traditional media gatekeepers has attracted millions of professionals and consumers alike to put up videos on media-sharing sites like YouTube in the hope that they will go viral. Highly successful viral videos can command a large following, obtain substantial media coverage, and may spawn a slew of remixes that feeds on their popularity. But viral phenomena are fraught with uncertainty. Without a clearer understanding of the forces driving individuals to pass on viral contents or engage in word-of-mouth communications about them, explicit efforts to stimulate buzz through deliberate viral attempts run the risk of backfiring.

This paper illustrates an approach to explicate virality by examining how individuals make sense of a viral phenomenon, and engage in interpersonal communication about it. Successful viral videos are typified by their phenomenological attributes—people typically mention a viral video by first talking about the elements for its popularity or about the attention it receives. In this way, a highly significant quality for virality is based on how the video becomes elaborated within the group it is popular with. What people find salient, meaningful and useful about the video, and the degree to which these knowledge structures are commonly shared within the group are fundamental to the communicative success of the video.

The present research examines the emergence of collective meaning of a viral video within a given socio-cultural context, and from which to form hypotheses and make predictions concerning individuals’ choices and actions associated with it. Using the example of the “Bus Uncle” viral video—a man covertly filmed on a camera phone reviling a fellow Hong Kong bus passenger for interrupting his call?three studies were conducted to elicit participants’ goals, judgments and collective meaning-making of the phenomenon. The case helps to exemplify the socio-cultural aspects of consumers’ participation in viral phenomena, the nature of user-generated content, and the psychological mechanism of ‘virality.’

The first two studies were conducted with local participants in Hong Kong. In Study 1, a laddering questionnaire was used to elicit participants’ goals for viewing the Bus Uncle video and the linkages between these goals. Using means-end chain analysis, the structure of the viewing goals and their linkages was mapped. In Study 2 participants were asked to sort newspaper comments obtained from local press coverage of the phenomenon. The sorted comments were then subjected to multidimensional scaling (MDS) to uncover participants’ common conceptual space and judgments. To elucidate contextual differences in the representations of the phenomenon, Study 3 replicated the procedures in Study 2 with British participants in the U.K. Using a geometric analytical procedure, the concordance between the knowledge structures obtained from the MDS analysis of the two samples was tested.

Study 1 showed that the desire for common conversation topics among friends was the most salient goal for viewing the video. Study 2 revealed that participants’ interpretations of press coverage on the video were guided by their judgments of whether the issues mentioned would make good conversations. These judgments converged with a relevant set of goals for viewing the video, suggesting that participants’ interpretations were motivated by their goals. When Study 2 was replicated in Study 3, judgments that serve dialogical purposes in the out-group sample were notably missing.

This paper proposes that a video becomes a viral phenomenon when it is sufficiently elaborated within a social group and shared ideas begin to emerge. The ability to make conversations about the video is arguably the most proximal determinant in this process. Tracing the goals and linkages that preceded this goal can illuminate the process that leads a video to virality. The studies show that salient aspects of individuals’ representations of viral videos do not arise from item characteristics but correspond to the relationships between people and the item, and the events represented by these relationships. They also reveal that the role of media coverage in facilitating a video going viral was not in raising the salience of any particular issue but in helping people understand what went on.

The findings suggest that the buzz and virality arising from the video were attributable to participants’ goals to create and negotiate social relationships through conversations with others in their social group. The need for personal judgments about the video becomes extenuated when participants were initially drawn to the video owing to others’ recommendations or to a lesser extent because it was widely talked about. In such circumstances, participants would rely on the judgments of others provided that their superordinate goal was to create conversation topics. This point to the importance of examining consumers’ goal-directed behaviors when seeking explanations for the persuasiveness of word-of-mouth communication.

REFERENCES


