

To Share or Not to Share: Analyzing the Motivation to Pass Along and Consume Online Contents

Faculty Advisor: Eun Soo Rhee

Amanda Somerville • Communication and Journalism • University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire



Abstract

The current study was conducted to understand the underlying processes of how online contents become viral, especially focusing on the motivation to both consume and pass along the viral contents to others. Previous research on viral marketing outlines four potential motivations for passing along online contents: the need to be part of a group, the need to be individualistic, the need to be altruistic, and the need for personal growth. Although previous studies have analyzed why individuals pass along online contents, they have not analyzed what influences them to be motivated to pass it along again to others.

Therefore, qualitative interviews with three undergraduate students were conducted to reveal the obscured insights underneath the processes of consuming and forwarding viral contents. Findings of the study showed that the motivation to consume and pass along the viral contents is closely related to the level of uncertainty about others' preferences and reactions, which leads to the difference in consumption and pass along patterns. Our findings support and build off of the previous research but also provide evidence for Uses and Gratification Theory.

Introduction

The current study aimed to understand the underlying process of how the online contents become viral, focusing on the motivation to both consume and pass along the viral contents (e.g., YouTube video) to others. Due to the complexity inherent in understanding the process and characteristics of viral contents, the current study used qualitative approach to reveal obscured insights underneath the process of consuming and forwarding viral contents.

As well as the marketing and advertising practitioners, academic researchers have been analyzing the phenomenon of how an online content goes viral. According to the study of Ho and Dempsey (2010), individuals tend to forward online content in four potential motivations: the need to be part of a group, the need to be individualistic, the need to be altruistic, and the need for personal growth. Particularly, they highlighted that it was the individuation that motivated individuals forwarding online content, rather than the inclusion (Ho and Dempsey, 2010).

Given that viral contents become viral through continuous and voluntary forwarding to others, the study should regard viral marketing to be a non linear process by including both receiver and forwarder perspective into the study. Although Camarero and San Jose's (2011) study attempted analyzing the whole process of viral marketing as viral dynamics, which include receiving-opening-forwarding, motivational cues were not found.

Therefore, following research questions were developed:

- How do the online users find viral content?
- After consuming the viral content, what was the motivation to pass it along (or not)?

Method

Data from this study come from three interviews with University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire undergraduate students. The interview was recorded via a video recorder with participant consent. Participants were chosen on the basis of a convenience sample of those who are heavy users of online and viral contents. The term 'heavy user' refers to those who spend 30 or more hours online in a week and consume or pass along viral content ten or

more times in a week. Participants included two freshmen and one senior. All participants were female.

The interviews, which were conducted in October 2012, consisted of an open-ended series of questions.

Sample questions include:

- Was there any content you recently viewed/enjoyed?
- How did you end up watching that content?
- Did you pass this information or video on to another person?
- What made you to refer this?
- What kept you from referring?
- What types of content do you refer?



Results

High Uncertainty:	Low Uncertainty:
Not sure if the receiver would like/feel interested/feel relevant to themselves	Quite sure the receiver would like/feel interested/feel relevant to themselves
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informational motivation <i>"I use Twitter a lot to get news... like for example about Hurricane Sandy or like things like that. Breaking news will pop up on Twitter."</i> • For work, homework, studying, research <i>"My phone is more for entertainment and my laptop is probably about 50:50 for school work and leisure and fun things..."</i> • Contents likely to be videos that take time to consume <i>"...if I'm going to go to a movie or something, I use it to watch all the trailers beforehand."</i> • Contents reached through direct searching and utilizing related search terms <i>"Usually, I would tell her the name of the song and she would search it, or vice versa."</i> • Referring contents through indirect route: posting on my own Facebook wall <i>"You can post it on your Facebook to show your friends as well."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entertainment motivation <i>"This made me laugh, I think this will make them laugh. I like to post things that make people laugh."</i> <i>Share content based on "common interests they share."</i> • For fun, leisure, killing time <i>"It's pretty much for me to kill time"</i> <i>Uses iPod touch "if I'm laying in bed."</i> <i>"It's mostly to interact with my friends."</i> • Contents likely to be images that can be consumed instantly <i>Memes: "if they're on Facebook and I see them and I like them I post it on my friend's walls."</i> • Contents reached through referrals, online and off-line word of mouth, random searching, following shared contents <i>"Yeah, I heavily use the suggested videos mainly for searching for new music to listen to."</i> • Referring contents through direct route: posting on friend's Facebook wall <i>"I'll probably just post it in to my friends' Facebook wall or send it in a message on Facebook"</i>

High Uncertainty:	Low Uncertainty:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When off-line word of mouth: not actively referring, the receiver can decide whether they will consume it <i>"Usually, I would tell her the name of the song and she would search it, or vice versa."</i> • Less likely to be shared through social media <i>"If it pertains to something we were talking about, like joke, then I might share with them, but I don't normally post them to my Facebook wall or anything..."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When off-line word of mouth: actively referring by saying "you should check this out" and often show the contents right away <i>"I usually just tell them face to face because we're always spending time together"</i> • Heavy reliance on social media for sharing <i>"Twitter and Facebook are like tandem to me"</i> <i>"What's popular now is based on social media."</i>

Discussion

Findings of the current study supports understanding of Uses and Gratification Theory (McQuail, 1983):

- Informative/educative contents are more likely to be consumed personally, and not likely to be passed along to others. This supports the Uses and Gratification theory that individuals consume online contents under the motivation to obtain information. When applied to Ho and Dempsey's (2010) findings, informative/educative contents are used for the need of individuation and personal growth and, thus, not likely to be shared with others.
- Entertainment contents are more likely to be consumed for fun and leisure and are easily passed along to others again. This supports the Uses and Gratification theory that individuals consume online contents under the motivation to connect with peers. When applied to Ho and Dempsey's (2010) findings, entertainment contents are used for the need of being part of a group or being altruistic and, therefore, likely to be shared with others.



References

- Camarero, C., & San Jose, R. (2011), Social and attitudinal determinants of viral marketing dynamics. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27, 2292-2300.
- Ho, Jason Y. C., & Dempsey, M. (2010), Viral marketing: Motivations to forward online content. *Journal of Business Research* 63, 1000-1006.
- McQuail, D. (1983), *Mass Communication Theory*, 1st ed., Sage, London.

Acknowledgements

We thank our participants for their time and contributions to this research.

We thank the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs for supporting this research, and Learning & Technology Services for printing this poster.