

# Going Viral: An Analysis of YouTube Videos

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*In this new era of marketing, ideas go viral, and spread like an infectious disease. Seeding strategies have strong influences on the success of viral marketing campaigns. In this paper, both case and content analysis were employed to examine the impact of influencers on viral campaigns. In doing so, this study extends on the two step/multistep models of communication. The empirical results show that seeding to well-connected people, celebrities, media vehicles, or anyone with a huge following through their greater reach is the most successful approach because these attractive seeding players are more likely to participate in viral marketing campaigns.*

## INTRODUCTION

A hot topic today is viral marketing, which describes the phenomenon by which consumers mutually share and spread marketing-relevant information in the form of emails, YouTube videos, and social media postings. The information is initially sent out deliberately by marketers to stimulate and capitalize on word-of-mouth (WOM) behaviors (Van der Lans et al. 2010) and encourage users to pass it on to other users, creating a potentially exponential growth in the message's visibility and effect. These characteristics parallel the traits of infectious diseases (Watts and Peretti 2007).

To date, there is no marketing academic literature that incorporates the new social media influencer and viral phenomenon into the communication model. The two-step flow model was first introduced in 1944 by Paul Lazarsfeld et al. in 1944, and hypothesizes that ideas flow from mass media to opinion leaders and from them to the wider population. It was later elaborated by Elihu Katz and Lazarsfeld in 1955 (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). The extended Multistep Flow Model says that most people form their opinions based on opinion leaders that influence the media. Opinion leaders are those initially exposed to a specific media content, and those that interpret it are based on their own opinion. They then begin to infiltrate these opinions through the general public who become "opinion followers."

The current model assumes that "opinion leaders" gain their influence through more elite media as opposed to mainstream mass media, social media influencers, and user generated content. However, with the advent of social media, there is a new type of opinion leader. User generated content producers, bloggers and other amateur journalists are creating news content, and people who have been made subjects of news articles are responding online, posting supplementary information to provide comments, context, and counterpoints. Increasingly, the public is turning to online sources for information and consumption matters, such as bloggers, user reviews, and tweeters, reflecting the growing trust in alternative media; and, to user generated content produced by the mass media for entertainment purposes.

Though social media is transforming the way organizations, consumers, and people in general communicate and entertain, the academic literature reflects remarkably little effort to understand where

this new type of opinion leader fits into the communication model. This is surprising given that the phenomenal growth of texting, blogging, and networking, and how companies tap into Facebook, Twitter, and blogging for customer communication. A Forrester Research study confirms that 13.4% of U.S. adults online create 80% of the content that influences people, and 6.2% of these web users are responsible for 80% of social media influence (Henneberry 2012). This last factor is of particular importance because it is critical to viral marketing success. Given that social media influencers disperse messages willingly, they are particularly attractive to marketers since they tend to be more cost efficient than traditional mass media advertising.

However, to score millions of viewers, and enjoy such results, four factors are critical (Hinz et al. 2011): (1) content that is easily memorable (Berger and Milkman 2011; Berger and Schwartz 2011; Gladwell 2002; Porter and Golan 2006); (2) the structure of the underlying digital social network (Bampo et al. 2008); (3) word of mouth pressure, described as the behavioral characteristics of those influenced and willingness to share message (Arndt 1967); and (4) the seeding strategy, which determines the initial set of targeted consumers (Bampo et al. 2008; Kalish, Mahajan, and Muller 1995; Libai, Muller, and Peres 2005), media sources, and social media influencers chosen by the initiator at the start of the viral campaign. The last factor is of particular importance because it suggests that the viral campaign is entirely under control of the initiator for it to go viral.

## METHODOLOGY

A two-part study was undertaken to understand how ideas go viral. Part 1 is a case study of Susan Boyle that attempts to validate the four critical factors of viral campaigns (Hinz et al. 2011). Susan Boyle, a contestant on *Britain's Got Talent*, transformed into a global sensation, attracting millions of YouTube viewers. Part 2 is a content analysis exploratory study that examines top viral YouTube videos for the purpose of identifying key elements of successful viral campaigns, differences in variations in levels of success, the relationship between source and popularity of video, and the role/impact of the influencer in communication models.

### Part 1: A Case Study of Susan Boyle

On April 11, 2009, Susan Boyle performed 'I Dreamed a Dream' from the musical *Les Miserables* on *Britain's Got Talent* in 2009, where both judges and audiences were blown away that the TV show attracted 10.3 million viewers. In one weekend, Susan Boyle's popularity rose very fast, and her performance on *Britain's Got Talent* went viral. As of 10pm ET Sunday, Visible Measures (2009) reported the following Susan Boyle statistics: (1) 650 video placements found associated with Susan Boyle, including the original performance, interviews and fan responses; (2) 93.2 million views, meaning that views nearly doubled during the weekend; and (3) 15.6 million views were counted on Saturday, and by Sunday, a further 30 million views were logged. Five days after her *Britain's Got Talent* performance, Susan Boyle was a worldwide internet phenomenon. A timetable of Susan Boyle's Internet viral phenomenon is illustrated in Table 1.

In the case of Susan Boyle, all four factors for creating a viral campaign were at work (Hinz et al. 2011). First, content that is easily memorable (Berger and Milkman 2011; Berger and Schwartz 2011; Gladwell 2002; Porter and Golan 2006). Susan Boyle's viral video included deep emotional content that was unusual and highly memorable. On the show, she performed the song 'I Dreamed a Dream' from the show *Les Miserable*. Importantly, both the show and the song are renowned, given that they were translated into twenty-one languages, including Japanese, Hebrew, Icelandic, Norwegian, Czech, Polish, Spanish, and Estonian, and there have been 31 cast recordings featuring the song (Translations and Cast Recordings 2009). To add, numerous popular singers performed the song "I Dreamed a Dream" over the years. Susan Boyle was criticized in the press for her frumpy appearance and awkward mannerisms. Yet, her performance was exceptional, resulting in a standing ovation and an audience in a state of shock and jubilation. She elicited a unanimous vote taking her into the next round of competition by judges Pier

Morgan, Amanda Holden, and Simon Cowell, giving Susan Boyle "the biggest yes [he had] ever given" in his three years of judging the show.

Second, for campaigns to go viral, the structure of the underlying digital social network is critical (Bampo et al. 2008). In the case of Susan Boyle, the digital social network employed was YouTube, a platform where most of the content is uploaded by individuals, in addition to media corporations such as CBS, the BBC, Vevo, Hulu, and other organizations offering some of their material via YouTube, as part of the YouTube partnership program (Weber 2007). Viral videos' longevity relies on factors which draw the audience to watch them. YouTube simplifies matters, partially because of the availability of affordable digital cameras (Grossman 2006).

A third important factor is word of mouth pressure, described as the behavioral characteristics of those influenced and willingness to share message (Arndt 1967). In various articles discussing Susan Boyle's audition, she is depicted as "frumpy" and "awkward," and laughed at in describing her small town and desire to be a famous singer like Elaine Paige. She is a 47 year old unemployed charity worker who owns cats and claims "Never been kissed." Her incredible performance was a shock to the audience, followed by awe, cheering, and judges' reactions of best performance ever. Most important, the heading in the media "Never judge a book by its cover" left much for people to talk about and share among friends in social platforms. Even more, there was Susan Boyle drama, including losing *Britain's Got Talent*; checking into a mental health institution for exhaustion, and exhibiting strange behavior; requiring mental and psychological attention; and, fighting with her management team and family. Adding to this was Simon Cowell and the *Britain's Got Talent* team, accusations that Simon exposed her unfairly, exploiting for the purpose of making money. British media outlets were constantly on alert, after audition and exploiting her character and life. Her personal management team was also accused of exploiting for the purpose of benefiting financially. Clearly, it appears that to sustain popularity and viral activity over time, there must be constant drama worth talking about. This is important for marketers who want to harness the power of consumers to pass along the marketing message as a freebie to the firm.

Lastly, the most important contributing factor on the success of Susan Boyle's viral campaign was the seeding strategy, which determines the initial targeted audience. In the case of Susan Boyle, the seeding strategy consisted of attractive seeding points, including celebrities, media, bloggers, and twitters. An empirical study published in *Journal of Marketing* shows that seeding to well-connected people is the most successful approach because these attractive seeding points are more likely to participate in viral marketing campaigns (Hinz et al. 2011).

On *Britain's Got Talent*, Simon Crowell appears as a judge alongside Amanda Holden and Piers Morgan. In 2004 and 2010, American magazine *Time* named Cowell one of the 100 most influential people in the world (Time Magazine 2004, 2010). In 2010, British magazine *New Statesman* listed Cowell at number 41 in a list of "The World's 50 Most Influential Figures 2010" (New Statement 2010), and *TV Guide* named him #10 in their 2013 list of The 60 Nastiest Villains of All Time (TV Guide 2013). In the voting round, Piers Morgan emphatically stated that Susan Boyle's performance got the "biggest yes" that he has "ever given anybody." Amanda Holden said, "Yes, definitely. Brilliant." Simon Cowell closed by saying: "Susan Boyle, you can go back to the village with your head held high. It's three yeses."

Two days after Susan Boyle's performance, American actor Ashton Kutcher and the first user of Twitter to have more than 1,000,000 followers (Sutter 2009; Kaufman 2009) highlighted the Susan Boyle Digg link through his @aplusk Twitter account. Ashton Kutcher – with an audience of 1,000,000 at his fingertips contributed to Susan Boyle's viral success in the United States. That day, Demi Moore retweeted the @aplusk. Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore's tweets were retweeted repeatedly and 'Susan Boyle' turned into a Twitter trend. YouTube counts rose. The original Digg story was Dugg over and over. Following this, Susan Boyle was featured on BBC, CNN, CBS early show, and other media.

## **Part 2: Content Analysis: An Exploratory Study**

The content analysis study explored the relationship between the social media influencer on YouTube video popularity. To investigate, the study extracted most popular videos from categories of music, sports

gaming, movies, TV shows, news, and spotlight. These included 160 YouTube videos, analyzed by topic, source, views, subscriptions, length, engagements, and audience profile.

The study examined factors that were likely to impact the social media influencer defined by (1) the total number of videos by source author and (2) subscriber number. The variables studied included: video topic, popularity, total number of videos from source editor, total number of views, subscriber number, likes, dislikes, total number of comments, total number of favorites, audience, an analysis of the transcript, key discovery events if any, and potential explanation for viral activity. While the effects were small, it appears that the number of views and likes relate to the source author. Clearly, the source influence on the network affects how ideas are spread and the rate of its adoption, suggesting that targeting influential people in a network are good seeding points for a viral marketing campaign.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study presents support for the importance of seeding points in influencing the success of viral campaigns. In this article, a two-part study examined the impact of influencers on campaigns that go viral. The empirical results show that seeding to well-connected people, celebrities, media vehicles, or anyone with a huge following through their greater reach is the most successful approach because of these attractive players are more likely to participate in viral marketing campaigns.

Communication models that incorporate the new type of ‘opinion leader’ and viral phenomenon would be a fruitful avenue for future research. Another extension is to provide a foundation for future research by clarifying the new ‘opinion leader’ construct, developing research propositions, and constructing an integrating framework that includes antecedents and consequences of communication, where some forms of communication are associated with the success of viral marketing campaigns. In addition, from a marketing perspective, it would be useful to target seeding points that expedite the diffusion of viral marketing campaigns.

**TABLE 1**  
**SUSAN BOYLE TIMELINE**

- 9<sup>th</sup> April – no one has heard of Susan boyle



- 11<sup>th</sup> April – Susan Boyle appears on *Britain's Got Talent* and performs 'I Dreamed a Dream' from *Les Miserables*. The judges are blown away and the show attracts 10.3 million viewers.
- 11<sup>th</sup> April – Susan Boyle's performance is uploaded (unofficially) to YouTube
- 11<sup>th</sup> April – Susan Boyle's YouTube performance Dugg by Jenocide312



- 11<sup>th</sup> April – Ashton Kutcher highlights the Susan Boyle Digg link through his @aplusk Twitter account. Ashton Kutcher – with an audience of 1 million at his fingertips contributed to Susan Boyle’s viral success in the United States.



- 11<sup>th</sup> April – Demi Moore retweets @aplusk
- Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore’s tweets were retweeted repeatedly and ‘Susan Boyle’ turned into a Twitter trend. YouTube counts rose. The original Digg story was Digg over and over.
- After: Appearances of Susan Boyle on BBC, CNN, CBS early show, and other media.

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