What is a viral phenomenon?

In general today virality means a content (a verbal text, an image, a motion graphics, a video) that spreads from person to person (or from node to node) through the Internet.

In other words virality is usually treated as a distinct phenomenon particular to today's Internet culture.

But viral movements have been around forever.

Think for example of motivational posters many decades ago. Think of Furbies, and a lot pop phenomena such as Britney Spears, Lady Gaga, Miley Cyrus, etc.

Going Viral

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L'Impere degli audiovisivi

Nel 2018 la Rete sarà attraversata da circa un milione di minuti di audiovisivi al secondo.

Se nel 2014 lo streaming è stato responsabile del 67% del traffico dati globale, nel 2019 la Rete sarà occupata per il 80% da dati video.

Visual Network Index Cisco 2015

Going viral (in the 70s)
Furbies

A Furby is a popular electronic robotic toy resembling a hamster/owl-like creature.

From its launch in the Christmas season of 1998 to 2000, it was a "must-have" toy.

Furbies were the first successful attempt to produce and sell a domestically-aimed robot.

A newly purchased Furby starts out speaking entirely Furbish, the unique language that all Furbies use, but is programmed to start using English words and phrases in place of Furbish over time. This process is intended to resemble the process of learning English.

Furbies sold 1.8 million units in 1998, 14 million units in 1999, and altogether in its three years of original production, Furbies sold over 40 million units.

Its speaking capabilities were translated into 24 languages.

In 2005, new Furbies were released, with voice-recognition and more complex facial movements, and many other changes and improvements.

And now there’s a new version, launched in 2012.

In search for virality

Today many researchers in many different disciplinary fields are in search for the “magic recipe” of virality.

This research involves big multinational industries, as well as small and medium enterprises, but also university departments, newspapers, private research centers and so on.

Why?

It is evident that thousands or – better – millions of visits to a web site imply money from the advertising world.
In search for virality
At the international level the most interesting insights on virality come from:
1. Thales Teixera, assistant professor at Harvard Business School,
2. Jonah Berger, Associate Professor of Marketing at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania,
3. the research group of Henry Jenkins, who studied this topic within the Convergence Culture Consortium of the Comparative Media Studies at MIT (now Futures of Entertainment), where he worked for 20 years (from 2009 to present he teaches at the University of Southern California).

Resources

Spreadable Media
2013

Contagious
2013

Invisible Influence
2016

Basic online resources
The website of Jonah Berger: jonahberger.com
The website of Thales Teixeira at HBS: http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Profiles/profile.aspx?facId=522373
The blog of Henry Jenkins: http://henryjenkins.org/
What is a viral video?

There’s no universal definition of what constitutes a “viral video”.

I have heard the expression “viral video” used to represent:
1. a threshold of views,
2. a rate of growth,
3. a threshold of sharing,
4. and occasionally an aesthetic.

The numbers of YouTube

In 2009 some 53% of YouTube’s videos had fewer than 500 views.
About 30% had less than 100 views.
Meanwhile, just 0.33% has more than 1 million views.

The numbers of YouTube

This is a bit of a surprise to many who think about “viral” as being in the millions, but it should make you feel better about the video of your cat that hasn’t gotten 1 million views yet.

Getting 10,000 views on YouTube makes a video a good viral.
The numbers of YouTube

On March 15, 2012, YouTube changed its recommendation system to make the time spent with a video or channel a stronger indicator than a click in calculating the number of “views”.

Before the change, YouTube tracked the length of views up to 30 seconds, primarily to make sure each click led to an actual view.

Now it’s tracking across even longer timeframes to see if viewers watched. This means it may tracks up to two or three minutes of content.

Shares

Unruly Media’s viral video chart ranks the top videos in terms of sharing. (Unruly Media is a company of Social Video, Social Video advertising and Video advertising experts, which is based in NY)

To make the top 100 list, a video has to get about 8,500 shares in 24 hours. But this happens to 0.01% videos.

So let’s say that 1,000 shares are acceptable for a good viral video.

What is a viral video?

Let us assume that to define a video “viral” it is sufficient the following performance of views, sharing and growth curve:

10,000+ views
1,000+ shares
in 24 hours.

What makes a video “viral”?

There’s a business reason at play.

Longer viewing means more opportunity to show viewers ads.

And engaged viewers are also thought to be in a more receptive mind-set for brand advertising.

http://viralvideochart.unrulymedia.com/all
What makes a video “viral”?  

Most analyses converge on the fact that most “viral” videos have some aspects in common with reference to:

- theme,
- structure.

Themes  

Most “viral videos” fit into one (or more) of the following thematic categories, which I have tried to sort by people’s reactions:

1) LOL, that’s so funny! Parody of something popular and timely, or any content which makes people smiling or laugh (at least to some degree) or stimulates people’s sense of humour.

2) Cute! Any content which makes people say: “cute!”: pets, puppies, young cats, and, of course, children.

3) Hot! Any content that more or less appeals to erotic sphere. Any soft sex content.

4) Wow! Any content which stimulates in us questions such as: “Did that just happen?” (it usually didn’t), “Is it true or false?”, “How is it possible?”. And the answer is not easy at all.

5) Let’s do the same! Any content which is easy enough to be repeated, remixed, imitated.

Films  

Double Rainbow  

It all started on January 8th 2010, when mountain man Paul Vasquez came across a double rainbow, made a video (complete with some wacky, emotional commentary), and uploaded it to YouTube.

On July 3, comedian, actor and ABC star Jimmy Kimmel tweeted about the Vasquez’s original clip and it took off.  


Jen Aniston’s Sex Tape  

"Jennifer Aniston Goes Viral", also known as "Jen Aniston's Sex Tape", is a viral video advertisement by Glacéau, starring actress Jennifer Aniston, that promotes the Smartwater bottled water brand.

The video was uploaded to YouTube on 7 March 2011 and, as of 1 July 2011, had attracted more than nine and a half million views.
Structure

Now we meet a problem

Over the years on the Internet, attention span appears to be going down, which means that the video needs to repeatedly earn the viewer throughout its duration.

What is attention span?

Attention span is the amount of concentrated time on a task without becoming distracted.

Most educators and psychologists agree that the ability to focus attention on a task is crucial for the achievement of one’s goals.

It’s no surprise that attention spans have been decreasing over the past decade due to the increase in external stimulation.

Structure

So, it seems crucial to capture attention in the first 8 seconds.

Attention span

| Source: http://www.statisticbrain.com/attention-span-statistics/ |

Which structure?

Let us listen to the voice of some analysts directly.

Not only do they speak about the structure that a video needs to have in order to become viral, but also they focus on other important ingredients of virality.
**Why videos go viral**  
**Kevin Allocca**

Kevin Allocca is YouTube’s trend manager.

“I admit, I have a pretty unusual job.” – Kevin Allocca on Socialtimes.com

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**Film**

A TED conference by Kevin Allocca.  
November 2011.

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**Why videos go viral**  
**Thales Teixeira**

Thales Teixeira is an assistant professor in the Marketing Unit of Harvard Business School (HBS).  
He holds a Ph.D. in marketing from the University of Michigan.  
He earned a bachelor’s degree in business administration and master’s degree in statistics at the University of São Paulo, Brazil.

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**Why videos go viral**

Tastemakers.  
Participation.  
Unexpectedness.

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**Why videos go viral**  
**Thales Teixeira**

His research domain comprises advertising and the Economics of Attention, particularly within TV and internet videos.  
He is also a proponent of using eye-tracking and facial-tracking technologies to engineer the design of video communications moment-to-moment in order to attract and retain viewer attention.
Why videos go viral
According to Teixeira:
1. It is crucial to capture attention in the **first 5-8 seconds**.
2. It is crucial to induce **joy**, which amounts to entertaining people.
3. There’s progression that **starts by surprising** the viewer, avoids interjecting much advertising, and takes the viewer on an **emotional roller coaster**.

Why videos go viral
According to Teixeira:
4. People share for **self-interest reasons**: they want to appear cool, they want to become leader of a community and so on. So, **self-interest** overcomes interests in others.
5. This leads to the concept of **advertising symbiosis**, a **win-win relationship** between the brand and the consumers who share the brand’s contents.

Let’s go back to the problem of structure...
To sum up, some of the main ingredients of the **structure** focused on by the analysts are:
1. The ability to capture our attention in the **first 5-8 seconds** and to maintain it during the video.
2. The ability to tell a **story**.
3. The ability to induce **emotions**.

What about stories?
What about stories?

Today the marketing emphasizes the importance of the so-called “storytelling”.

Semiotics has pointed out the fundamental structure of storytelling.

The Narrative Scheme

The Narrative Scheme consists of four formal elements that can be thought both as abstract components defining any possible narrated action, or as sequential steps of an action’s actual narration.

This is the usual basic sequence of narration:
Manipulation – Competence – Performance – Sanction

The Narrative Scheme

The elements of the Narrative Scheme can be analyzed through six relational Actants:
Sender/Receiver, Subject/Object and Helper/Opponent.

So in the Manipulation phase, the Sender attributes a task to the Receiver (which is also the Subject, the hero of the story); Competence regards the preparation of the Subject for completing the task, thanks to the Helper; in Performance, the Subject defeats the Opponent and completes the task, obtaining the Object; Sanction is the conclusion, in which the Sender recognizes the success of the Subject.

So you have six main relational roles:
Addresser or Sender
Addressee or Receiver
Subject or Hero
Object of Value
Helper
Opponent

Two ingredients

So there are two fundamental ingredients in a good story:

A Subject or Hero who search for an Object of Value
A Subject or Hero who finds an Opponent on his/her path.

Gangnam Style
Gangnam Style

The song is the 18th pop single by the South Korean musician Psy. It was released on July 15, 2012 and was immediately a sensation, receiving about 500,000 views on its first day.

On December 21st, 2012, it became the first YouTube video to reach one billion views, after surpassing “Baby” by Justin Bieber in November 2012.

As of April 4th, 2014, the video has been watched over 1.95 billion times on YouTube.
Inspired by conversations with thousands of employees, partners and guests, the campaign focuses on the essence of the Shangri-La culture ‘embracing people from the heart and treating them like family’.

“What is truly distinctive about the kind of Asian hospitality that Shangri-La offers is our colleagues’ genuine care and respect for our guests and each other. For us, this is more important than talking about palatial buildings or beautiful locations, which is why we choose this dramatically different and powerful style of campaign. It conveys the value of genuine kindness, something that is very relevant in today’s society,” said Greg Dogan, president and CEO of Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts.

The television advertisement was launched as a 90-second film, followed with a 60 and 30 second cut down versions for television, in-flight, online and cinemas.

The campaign includes a set of magazine advertisements, featuring wolves, dolphins and a swan.
Thank you and good bye

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