

AISHA SAMBO

REAL INFLUENCE

Psychology Of Viral Media



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Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the findings of an attempted viral campaign and to explore the psychology of viral content online. This article first provides an introduction to viral marketing and a review of two successful viral campaigns used by non-profit organisations, the KONY 2013 campaign and the 2014 ALS ice bucket challenge.

Then a review of two contemporary literature, namely Botha and Reyneka's (2013) '*To share or not to share: the role of content and emotion in viral marketing*' and Rollins et al (2014) '*Viral Marketing: Technique and Implementation*' will be critiqued to evaluate the effects and methodology of viral.

Finally from exploring Rollins et al article an evaluation of their findings from the attempted viral campaign will be evaluated. This report is positioned towards non-profit organisations.

Introduction

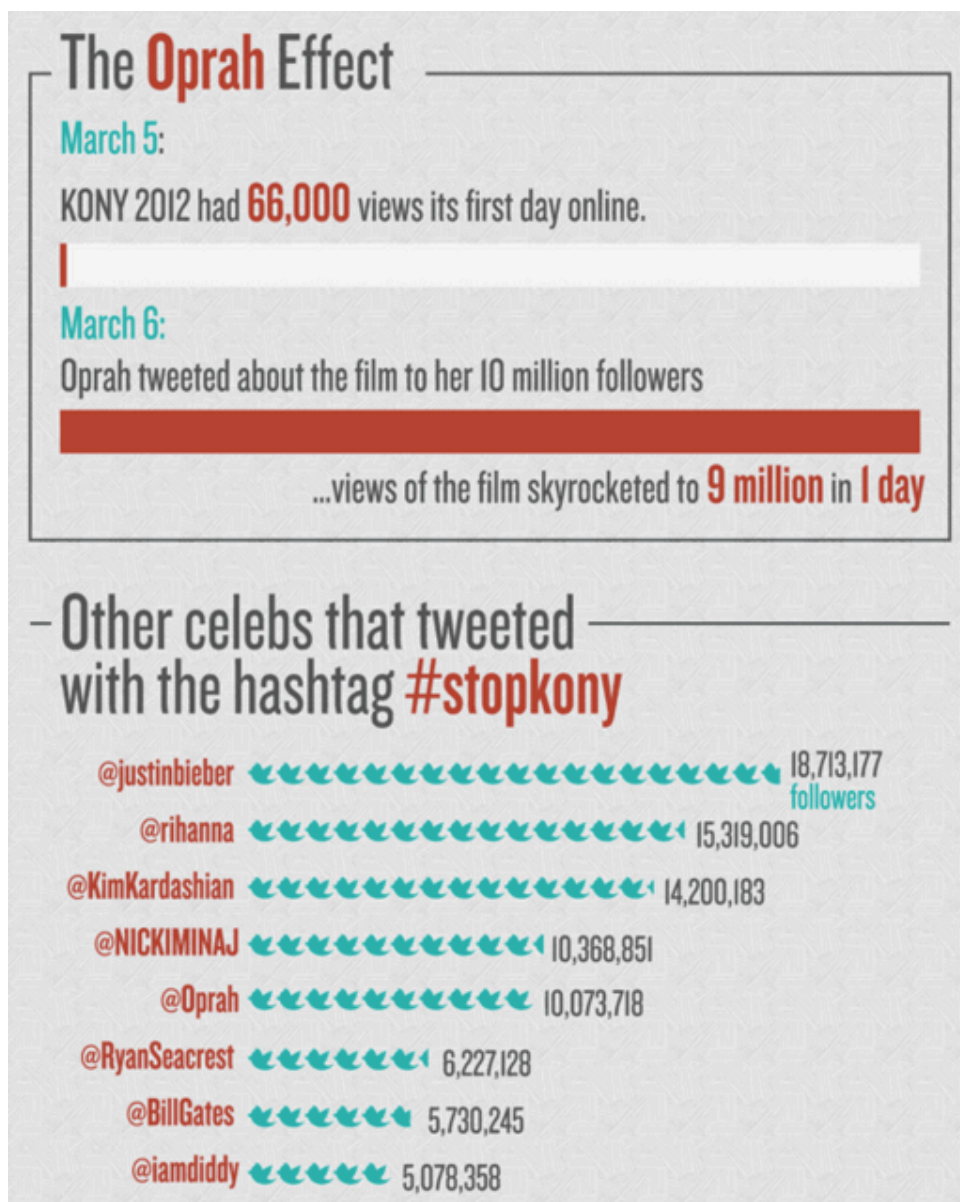
One of the most recent influential global trends has been the emergence and rapid growth of social media. Companies and individuals have found an innovative medium enabling them to express themselves, share their views and connect with others in a rapid way. Consequently, companies are increasingly utilising viral marketing, as it performs an important role in influencing public opinion in terms of products, brands, corporate reputations, politics, public personalities and ideas (Botha and Reyneke 2013). In 1996 Knight first introduced the term ‘viral marketing’, referring to it as content or messages spreading through social media like a virus (Phelps et al 2004). Marketing professionals were soon fully aware of the impact that this would have on the future of Marketing and their profession.

The USA advertising spend on online video in 2014 was \$5.81 billion, but by 2016 this is forecast to reach \$9.59 billion (eMarketer, 2015). The most shared advert of all time from 2011 to 2013 was the 2011 “The Force” Super Bowl advert by Volkswagen (Unruly Media, 2014). This poses a question, as to why some online content is more “viral” than others? There could be a range of causation factors, such as celebrity influence, social media marketing, right-time marketing, an understanding of different internet users and Word of Mouth (WOM). All of these in the appropriate combination may provide the answer as to whether or not, and to what extent, an online campaign would be virally successful.

Evidence from the WOM literature provides support for the premise that consumers are often driven by altruistic motives in online (Phelps et al 2004) and offline environments (Sundaram et al 1998). Since the decision to share content is voluntary, understanding the motivations of Internet users in forwarding online content is important. If a particular type of content fits well with Internet users they may be more readily motivated to pass it on and thus reach a large group of other Internet users (i.e. becoming viral). This is why understanding Internet users' motivation to forward online content is crucial, as it would enable business to focus its advertising spend more appropriately, produce a more effective viral rate per dollar spent and gain an advantage over its rivals.

One viral video that attracted unprecedented online interest was the campaign promoting the arrest of Joseph Kony, a Ugandan warlord and terrorist group head. It was posted online by “Invisible Children” a non-profit organisation. The video portrayed Kony as an enemy to the world, and within 6 days from its posting the video was viewed more than 100 million times. This made it one of the fastest spreading viral videos in history (Figure 1). The key to its success was possibly the support it received from a number of celebrity supporters, such as Oprah Winfrey. Following her retweet to her 10 million followers the video quickly reached 9 million views. This illustrates the campaigns cost effectiveness, but also the importance of trust. Trust from Oprah Winfrey’s perspective, but also her supporters who would then have forwarded it on to their own followers, thus reaching an even larger audience.

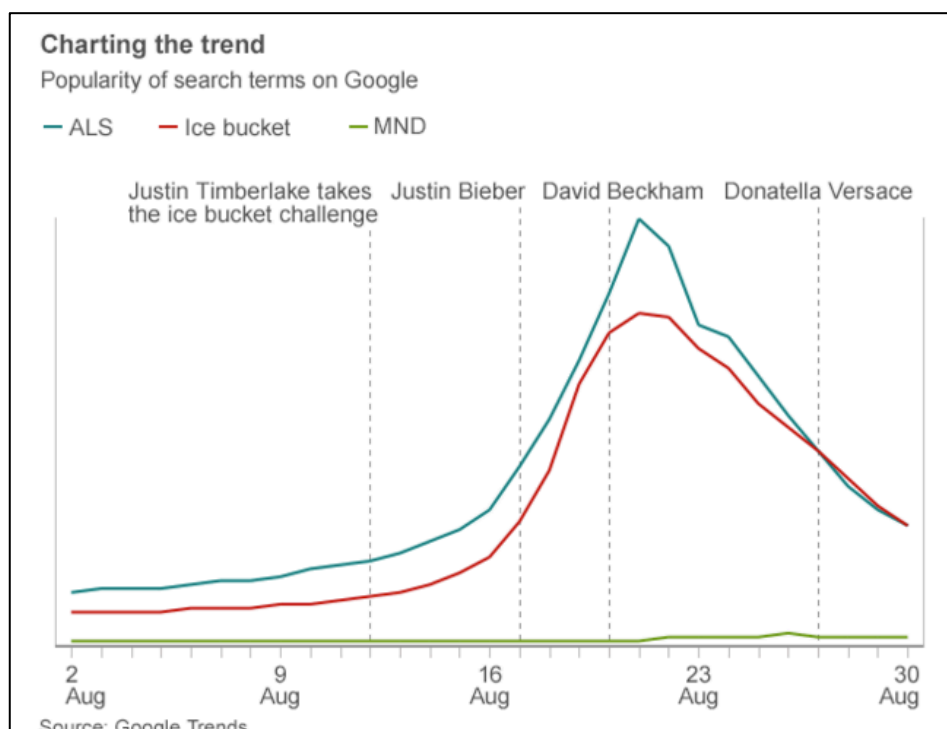
Figure 1: Infographics on KONY Campaign (Huffington Post 2012)



Another well planned and executed viral campaign was used by the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) Association. Their 2014 ALS Ice bucket Challenge aimed to raise money and awareness for the disease using social media marketing, but in the form of a continuous stream of communication. Here 2.4 million ice bucket-related videos were posted on Facebook alone. Its British equivalent, the Motor Neurone disease Association also benefited from a similar campaign. The success of the ALS campaign is demonstrated by their raising of \$98.2million from 29 July to 28 August 2013.

A clear factor explaining the success of these campaigns is the active and enthusiastic involvement of celebrities, which helped the campaigns to quickly spread (Figure 2) Personalities such as Justin Timberlake, Justin Bieber and David Beckham amongst many other celebrities participated in the challenge, with WOM occurring when the information began to spread through shared online posts. WOM was most rapid and specifically triggered when people were shown throwing buckets of water over their heads. Phing and Yazdanifard (2014) noted the importance in initiating WOM, of nominating another three people after completing the challenge. The value of using celebrities is thus apparent. However, in the case of the ice bucket challenge it also appears to be the uniqueness of the campaign and its specific humorous appeal to those engaging in it and the desire of the followers to become involved. This uniqueness suggests that it may be difficult to clearly identify the special characteristics or features of a viral advert that will result in its success.

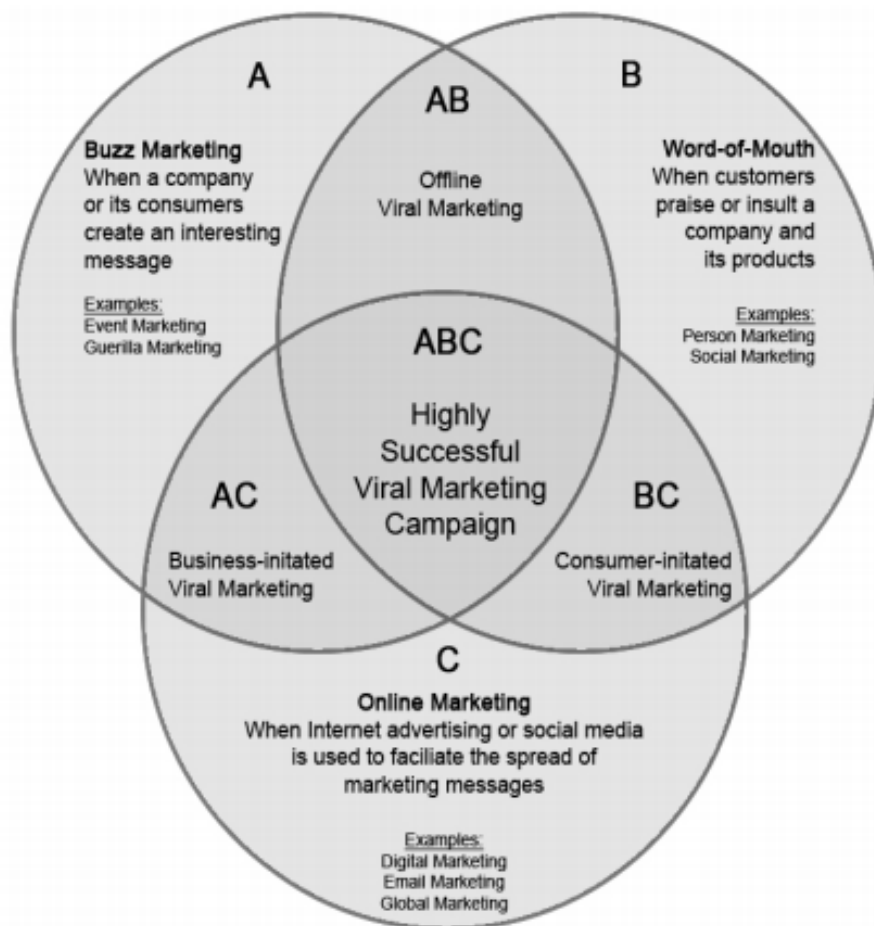
Figure 2: Charting the Campaign Trend (Townsend 2014)



Literature Review

Rollins et al (2014) investigates viral marketing from a consumer and business perspective. Through reviewing other articles (Emakina 2007; Sexton 2011; AMA 2012; Bampo 2008), the authors suggest a conceptual model to help maximize the chance of a successful viral marketing campaign; the three primary antecedents mentioned were word-of-mouth marketing, online marketing and buzz marketing (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Key Relationships in Viral Marketing (Rollins et al 2014)



In Botha and Reyneke's article (2013), the principles behind viral marketing were analysed in an attempt to identify the advantages and disadvantages of a possible viral marketing campaign. They focussed specifically on using in-depth interviews with Generation Y college attending consumers to explore the relationship between viral

media (specifically viral videos) and emotions. Participants in the research were shown two viral videos, which would be discussed and later form the basis for the interviews. Interestingly their interview findings showed that if a participant had an emotional reaction to the videos, they would not necessarily forward the video to their friends and/or family. Claims from their research showed that relevant content to participants and their friends was a more important determinant to share a video, emotions played less of a role in sharing videos with friends. The emphasis on emotions playing a significant role in determining why messages go viral is also supported by others authors, such as Phelps (2004) and Dobeles et al (2007). However, Rollins et al (2014) in their analysis, failed to mention the importance of emotions playing a part in the success of a campaign going viral. This suggests a need for further research in relation to the impact of emotions in such campaigns. This view is supported by Botha and Reyneke (2013) in noting that previous research has not fully explored the role of emotions in viral messages.

Rollins et al (2014) classified how cooperative messages go viral. For example, consumers either mentioned them through social media networks, thus making them popular. Alternatively, companies sometimes received viral promotion without investing any time at all. They also emphasised the importance of audience participation as a foundation for viral marketing, because viral marketing relies on consumers who are willing to take an active part in spreading messages (Shonedahl 2010). These views were not perceived strongly by Botha and Reyneke (2013).

Rollins et al (2014) claims messages had to be relevant to the user in order for them to be willing to spread the message. There was no mention of trust as a relevant factor in determining whether the message was spread, although if trust was absent it could have made the user less willing to spread it. Examples were used in the article to illustrate how successful businesses that initiated viral marketing campaigns focused more on content, interactivity and humour than advertising. The importance of humour was alluded to above in the case of the ice bucket challenge. Humour was also a recurrent theme in Botha and Reyneke's findings, however they clarify the sending behaviour in one of their videos was more clearly explained by emotions where the actual content did not emerge as a key theme in the finding.

Knight (2007) notes the shift of advertising spending to viral marketing has become more credible and cost effective. One of the possible causes for this relates to trust. According to a Nielsen study (2013) 84% of consumers trust product recommendations from friends and family. The importance of trust cannot be over emphasized, as a user who trusts the content they are reading or accessing will be far more ready to pass it on to their followers or other groups in general. (ref why it is cost effective). Thus if trust can be facilitated and promoted this would also facilitate the cost effectiveness of the advertising spend. However, trust may be only one relevant component. This is why it is important to identify other characteristics of successful online content, which are more readily forwarded by users. Rollins et al (2014) pointed out that if consumers perceive a company as friendly, then the company would appear trustworthy, and when consumers trust a company their marketing messages “go viral” or are spread by “word-of-mouth”. Thus trust appears again as a key feature of a successful viral advert.

Both articles acknowledged limitations to their study reducing the likelihood to raise issues to dispute findings or criticise arguments. However, reflecting on Botha and Reyneke’s study, they claim to that their article looked specifically at the relationship between emotions and content in ‘viral videos’, however only two sample viral videos were used, this underlines a gap in their study.

Rollins et al study (2014) highlighted on limitations for marketers in controlling viral marketing, they identify lack of control over distributing content and marketing messages as a limitation for successful viral marketing. Another reasonable limitations highlighted in Botha and Reyneke’s study (2014) was acknowledging how narrow the focus was on the role that emotion and only content played in videos go viral. They highlight and identify other factors that might contribute towards viewers connecting emotionally with certain videos.

Both articles showed elements of viral marketing being interactive and social.

Conclusion

The insight from the article useful

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Findings on Viral Campaign Project

To start with creating a viral campaign we considered first researching on other viral campaigns for inspiration and ideas. We had read online news articles from Forbes, Social Media Today, Brand Republic and Marketing Week on viral marketing campaigns. We also made use of [book] to guide the idea for this campaign.

We explored using current topics and popular theme trending online at the time as a basis for our idea. We considered making a short video because (reference). We then decided to use a photo of a famous celebrity for the campaign as leverage. The benefit of this would be having an already engaged audience with the celebrity's brand. We also analysed content across various social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter, Vine, and Instagram. The campaign was aimed towards the fans of the celebrity, movers online and other meme creators.

On the 4th of October Aubrey Drake Graham a Canadian rapper, singer, songwriter and actor shared a photo on his Instagram page with his 14 million followers. It had not been the first time the celebrity had posted a shirtless photo of himself, in the past the last shirtless photo of him went viral because he had gradually transformed physically. He had gained a lot of attention since his transformation and the time frame to launch our campaign was adequate with the time Drake posted the photo. According to Diamond (2013) the use of text and visual enhances the power of communicating the message, hence why *the basis for the campaign was an image attached to a text*. User engagement rate is also five times higher when a photograph is included on twitter (Stadd 2015).

By selecting the most influential users went viral online with fans remaking the image and creating their own meme's. by eliciting humour through this piece of content *The social motivation driving sharing the photograph was humour*

- *What are you hoping to achieve?*
- *A discussion of the process of distributing the material*
We had discussed to
- *An account of the success or failure of the project*
The project was a failure because....
- *The number of 'likes' and 'shares'*

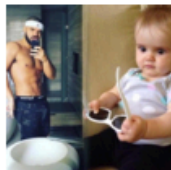
Although the tweet was seen 577 times, only four people shared it. The content did not have strong enough emotion; neither did it provide a compelling enough reason for the audience to retweet it. There had already been other meme's

Write a short findings report of around 500 to 600 words, as a group, outlining briefly the outcomes of your campaign based on your notes on the above. This report attracts 10% of the overall mark. Please submit a copy along with your report (below).

We were hoping to achieve viral success with our material. We assumed that due to the fact that the pictures had initially gained some attention separately, that by bringing them together it would create a greater reaction amongst our audience. Drake also has a reputation of posting gifs/memes that he is in, so ultimately we wanted it to achieve enough attention in order for drake to pick it up and repost it – resulting in it gaining more exposure.

We decided to use Twitter as our means to distribute our viral material. We considered Instagram however due to the practicality of sharing it against twitter, we decided. The mechanism for sharing posts on Twitter simply requires our audience to retweet it, whereas Instagram would have required a download or the use of a reposting app. Due the complications in this we came to the conclusion that in order to try and gain as much attention it was vital that our material was easy to share.

Tweet Activity



Shushi @Shushi_XO
What! Where! How!?
pic.twitter.com/Qef699HPmJ

Impressions 590

Total engagements 154


Media engagements 122

Detail expands 16

Profile clicks 8

Retweets 4

Link clicks 4

 **Reach a bigger audience**
Get more engagements by promoting this Tweet!

[Get started](#)

As well as this, we made sure to distribute the post as organically as possible. There was no prompt in the status for anyone to retweet or favourite the post as we determined that we wanted it to look similar to other posts that we had seen go viral using this method

(insert examples)

Despite this we determined that the overall status of the project was that it was a failure.

In comparison to the tweet that we put out we found that there were in fact other similar post which admittedly were a lot funnier than ours. Although the pictures were quite current we had determined that we may have been on the end of the hype that had initially surrounded it.

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