

Emotions and Elements in Viral Advertising

Sara M. Shields

Texas State University

### **Abstract**

Viral advertising has continued to make its presence known through social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. However, little is still known about the successful factors leading to this phenomenon. This study expands knowledge on the term viral advertising and examines specific characteristics present in viral advertisements. The purpose of this research is to explore which elements, emotional appeals, advertising functions, and creative strategies are frequently used. Taylor's Six-Segment Message Strategy Wheel is used as a theoretical framework and applied when analyzing creative strategies within viral advertisements. A content analysis of 30 viral advertisements in 2013, 2014, and 2015 from adweek.com show that product presentation is limited and positive emotional appeals including funny and heartwarming emotions, were most frequently emitted during viral advertisements. The major advertising function in viral advertisements is to promote brand awareness, rather than a call to action or provide information. The results from this study will give advertising professionals and researchers a better understanding of the characteristics being used in successful viral advertisements. This research paper would be best suited in the Journal of Interactive Advertising.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Advertising has had a presence in print, TV, and radio for centuries. The first newspaper advertisement was published in 1704, following with the first radio advertisement in the 1920's, and finally the first TV advertisement in the 1940's. It wasn't until the 1990's when the first banner advertisement made its debut online. For nearly 20 years, the online advertising world has given consumers annoying popup, interstitial, and banner advertisements. In the past few years, a new online advertising phenomenon called viral advertising has taken the Internet by storm.

Viral advertising allows advertisers and marketers to disseminate high resolution video advertisements to a large audience. Although traditional advertising still has a presence on traditional mediums such as print, TV, and radio, they are starting to lose ground due to the new technologies available online. Among the multiple forms of advertisements online, viral advertising is the most non-obtrusive and personal form of advertising because the consumer can view the ads at their own convenience. One of the main purposes of viral advertising is to engage large audiences and reveal motivational and emotional processes through videos.

While there is a considerable amount of research done on the definitions and social media aspects of viral advertising, there is very limited research on the characteristics presence in viral advertisements. This research will fill the gap by exploring the frequency of multiple elements, emotions, advertising functions, and creative strategies in viral advertisements. This study will provide a background and a better understanding of frequent characteristics that are being used and deemed successful in viral advertisements. This study will answer the following questions:

RQ1: What are the frequent elements and emotions present in viral advertisements?

RQ2: What advertising functions are being used in viral advertisements?

RQ3: What creative strategies are used in viral advertisements?

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Since the beginning, traditional advertising has always been a form of one-way communication. The traditional mediums such as print, radio, and TV have never had an opportunity for consumer engagement. However, online advertising, specifically viral advertising, has created a gateway that allows two-way communication between a brand and the consumer. With the rise of viral advertising, advertisers, marketers and researchers should have a thorough understanding of viral advertising and how to use it effectively.

### **A. Defining Viral Advertising**

Recently, brands and advertisers have been jumping on the viral advertising bandwagon. But there is still much debate on what constitutes viral success and the definition of this phenomenon. Several researchers propose their own definitions that include characteristics, while others define viral advertising by what it is not. Eckler and Bolls (2011) define viral advertising by suggesting that "...they are persuasive in nature, they come from an identified sponsor, and their content is used to motivate further distribution of the message through peer-to-peer communication" (p. 2). Similarly, researchers Porter and Golan (2006) identify viral advertising as "...unpaid peer to peer communication of provocative content originating from an identified sponsor using the Internet to persuade or influence an audience to pass along content to others" (p. 29). Though the majority of research agrees that viral advertising is spread via the consumer and originates from an identified brand, Petrescue and Korgaonkar (2011) suggest that the spreading is based on ad content likeability, entertainment, and controversial characteristics.

Another way researchers try to define viral advertising is by what it is not or how it differs from traditional advertising. It's clear that there are several differences in characteristics

between traditional and viral advertising. First, traditional advertising requires media buying, while viral advertising does not. In the dissemination process, traditional advertising relies on media planning and buying, while viral advertising relies on the seeding of an advertisement and voluntary dissemination online (Golan & Zaidner, 2008). Another significant difference is the nature of the advertisements themselves. Traditional advertising typically bases their effectiveness on repetition and are typically successful due to continuous exposure.

Alternatively, viral advertisements include a viral component which increases the likelihood of the video to be forwarded (Golan & Zaidner, 2008). Petrescue (2014) explains that viral advertising also differs from traditional advertising in the following ways: catch message, controversy, provocative content, shock or surprise, entertainment, higher engagement levels, and are associated with humorous appeals.

### **B. Social Media and Viral Advertising**

In the past several years, social media platforms have become an influential medium for social interaction online. Social media includes a wide range of online platforms like Facebook and YouTube that have become a powerful communication tool. In 2010, 69% of Internet users used YouTube or Google video to watch or download videos (Purcell, 2010). Thanks to social media, viral advertisements have the ability to reach thousands or millions of consumers that can motivate them to recommend or interact with a brand (Eckler & Bolls, 2011). Unlike traditional advertising, the dissemination process in viral advertising is much quicker and easier due to social media. Since the consumer is in control of the dissemination, this creates several advantages for viral advertising such as: cheaper and quicker dissemination of messages, as well as interaction among brands and consumers (Petrescue & Korgaonkar, 2011). Specifically,

Petrescue and Korgaonkar (2011) explain that Facebook's potential can lead to a higher rate of disseminating a message as well as create an opportunity for brands to build relationships with the consumer.

### **C. Elements in Viral Advertising**

For viral advertisements to succeed, there should be something powerful about the content that encourages a consumer to pass along the message. Previous research suggests that consumers value noncommercial and personal viral advertisements over paid traditional advertisements. Since viral advertising is essentially controlled by the consumer, it's important that advertisers and researchers examine and explore how to keep a consumer engaged with a viral advertisement. Simply put, if the consumer is not interested in an advertisement, it could affect the attitude toward the advertisement or brand and the consumer's intention to share the message.

Although social media plays a large role in the dissemination process of viral advertisements, Petrescue and Korgaonkar (2011) argue that in order for an advertisement to become viral, it must include certain characteristics such as humor or shock. Viral advertisements typically focus on entertaining and engaging the consumer, while traditional advertisements usually include a call to action that is non-personal. Specifically, viral advertisements are more focused on generating brand awareness, rather than trying to use a call to action or inform the consumer on a product like traditional advertising does.

Porter and Golan (2006) suggest that, "...viral advertising relies on provocative content to motivate unpaid peer-to-peer communication" (p. 31). Their research proposes that viral advertisers believe sex, nudity, and violence are the motivators to the spreading of online

content. However, it is noted that emotions and appeals may vary across different industries. Porter and Golan did find, however, that the majority of industries rely on creating humorous content. Two industries that did not display humorous content were issue advocate groups and the fashion industry. Issue advocate groups refrained from using provocative content and instead used images of children frequently. Alternatively, the fashion industry typically included an approach to sexuality in their advertisements (Porter & Golan, 2006).

Other research has explored and examined commonalities in viral videos. West (2011) found that the majority of viral videos are short, which were defined as being three minutes or less. Another significant commonality found among viral videos was the element of irony. West (2011) found that the element of irony was present in 90% of the video sample. Other elements examined in West's study suggest that there are several various factors present in YouTube viral videos, but there is still uncertainty about which factors essentially lead to a video becoming viral.

#### **D. Emotions in Viral Advertising**

Previous research shows that consumers rate viral advertisements as more entertaining and interesting over traditional advertisements. Simply put, when a consumer feels a positive emotion after seeing an advertisement, the chances of passing on that message increase. Petrescue (2014) suggests that there are two reasons for an individual passing on humorous advertising messages. Petrescue (2014) suggests the first reason is for individuals to show their social community the information they found or to brag about it. The second reason Petrescue (2014) suggests is the want from an individual to make others feel what they felt in the advertisement.

Dobele, Lindgreen, Beverland, Vanhamme, and van Wijk (2007) argue that in order for a viral advertisement to be shared, it must create an emotional connection between the brand and the consumer. Dobele et. al (2007) examined five primary emotions that are experienced during viral advertisements which included: surprise, joy, sadness, anger, disgust, and fear. The most prevailing emotion revealed in this study was the emotion of surprise. Dobele et. al (2007) defined emotion of surprise as something that is unexpected, which concluded in responses of amazement and astonishment from participants. Participants from this study suggested that emotions may not be the leading factor in achieving success from a viral advertisement. Dobele et. al (2007) explains that there are two keys to securing the success of viral messages. The first key suggests that the success of a viral advertisement may not rely on an emotional connection, but that it relies on being unique and making the advertisement unforgettable. The second key suggests that viral advertisements should be targeted to a specific audience, which can in turn increase message forwarding and positive responses (Dobele, et. al, 2007).

Aside from research on specific emotions that viral advertisements emit, another study examines emotional tone on attitude toward the ad, attitude toward a brand, and intent to forward. Eckler and Boss (2011) found that attitude toward an ad, attitude toward a brand, and intent to forward a viral advertisement were more likely to be enjoyed when advertisements portrayed a positive emotional tone.

While much of the previous research is based on basic emotions, Poels and Dewitte (2006) classify two different emotions that people experience. The first emotion discussed is lower-order emotions, which are classified as being impulsive and uncontrollable reactions, this is also known as a 'type 1' emotion (Poels & Dewitte, 2006). The second emotion discussed by Poels and Dewitte (2006) is higher-order emotions, which rely on deeper cognitive processing of



a situation, this is also known as a ‘type 2’ emotion. Poels and Dewitte (2006) also explain common emotions such as “...fear, anger, and happiness are classified between both lower and higher order emotions” (p. 19). The reasoning these emotions can be classified under both emotions is because they can be felt automatically or after cognitive appraisal (Poels & Dewitte, 2006).

### III. METHODS

To have a better understanding of the frequent elements, emotions, advertising functions and creative strategies present in viral advertisements, a content analysis was conducted on a total of 30 viral advertisements from adweek.com (AdWeek, 2013; AdWeek, 2014; AdWeek, 2015). The 30 viral advertisements were split into ten each from 2013, 2014, and 2015 (Table 1). Each of the 30 viral advertisements were coded for the following variables:

**Elements:** Animals, Children, Product Presentation, Video Length

Animals: Are animals frequently used through out the ad?

Children: Are children frequently used through out the ad?

Product Presentation: Is the product or brand heavily used in the ad?

Video Length: Is the video short, less than 3 min, or long, more than 3 min?

**Emotions:** Humored, Heartwarming, Sad, Angry, Other

**Advertising Function:** Branding, Call to Action, Provide Information

Branding: Is the ad’s purpose for branding?

Call to Action: Is the ad’s purpose to make a purchase or action?

Provide Information: Is the ad’s purpose to provide information?

**Creative Strategy:** Ration, Acute, Routine, Ego, Social, Sensory

Which of the creative strategies are being used in the ad?

Five coders were selected to conduct a content analysis on the 30 viral advertisements. A codebook with definitions and reviews for specific terms was given to each coder in order to understand the terms being analyzed in this study. The codebook was used to improve coder reliability among each person to create a clear and consistent understanding on the appeals and strategies being coded in the content analysis.

**Table 1**

<b>Top 10 Viral Ads - 2013</b>	<b>Top 10 Viral Ads - 2014</b>	<b>Top 10 Viral Ads - 2015</b>
10. Volvo "The Epic Split"	10. DTAC "The Power of Love"	10. Kleenex "Unlikely Friendships"
9. Ram Trucks "Farmer"	9. Thai Life Insurance "Unsung Hero"	9. Microsoft "Robert Downy Jr Delivers a Real Bionic Arm"
8. MGM/Carrie "Telekinetic Coffee Shop Surprise"	8. Nike "Winner Stays"	8. Fanpage.it "Slap Her - Childrens Reactions"
7. Pepsi Max "Test Drive"	7. Always "Like a Girl"	7. Zorba "Maya"
6. Budweiser "Brotherhood"	6. Wren "First Kiss"	6. The Ad Council "Love has No Labels"
5. Cornetto "Yalin - Keyfi Yoluna, Aski Sonunda"	5. American Greetings "World's Toughest Job"	5. Budweiser "Lost Dog"
4. Kmart "Ship My Pants"	4. Budweiser "Puppy Love"	4. Roc by Ronaldo "Cristiano Ronaldo in Disguise"
3. Evian "Baby and Me"	3. Nike "The Last Game"	3. Purina "Puppyhood"
2. Geico "Hump Day"	2. 20th Century Fox "Devil Baby Attack"	2. Disney Parks "Disney Characters Surprise Shoppers"
1. Dove's "Real Beauty Sketches"	1. Activia "Shakira La La La"	1. Android "Friends Furever"

### **A. Theoretical Framework**

Similar to another study (Golan & Zaidner, 2008), this research uses Taylor's (1999) Six-Segment Message Strategy Wheel as a tool for analyzing creative strategies in viral advertisements. Taylor identified two advertising approaches: transmission view and ritual view,

with three subcategories within each. The transmission view's needs are directed towards information, while the ritual view's needs are directed towards emotional importance (Taylor, 1999).

### *The Ritual View*

The ritual view contains three subcategories: ego, social, and sensory. The ego segment suggests that "consumer's emotional needs are fulfilled by products that are ego-related" (Taylor, 1999, p. 12). Here, the consumer is not specifically interested in receiving information, but rather they want to make a statement about who they are as a person. The role of communication under the ego segment is to show a consumer how a product can fit within a person's lifestyle and their perceptions of themselves (Taylor, 1999).

The social segment suggests that "products are used to make statements to others" (Taylor, 1999, p. 13). The appeals under the social segment consist of consumers wanting to be noticed and gain social approval. The role of communication within this segment is to create an appropriate social situation, typically including another person in the purchase decision, by motivating the consumer to purchase products based on emotions (Taylor, 1999).

The sensory segment suggests a product can make a consumer feel delightful based on the five human senses. The role of communication in the sensory segment is to appeal to a consumer's five senses including: smell, touch, hearing, taste and sight (Taylor, 1999).

### *The Transmission View*

The transmission view contains three subcategories: routine, acute, and ration. The routine segment uses an approach that suggests the importance of a product that is used in a

consumer's daily routine. This segment has a dual role in communication as it convinces a consumer on a specific brand then reminds the consumer to continue purchasing (Taylor, 1999).

The acute segment is "characterized by a consumers need for a product or product part" (Taylor, 1999, 13). Since there are traditionally multiple brands with a similar product, consumers will more than likely choose what is easily available, a familiar brand or a cheaper price. The communication role in the acute segment is to build recognition as a popular and trusted brand so it influences the consumers purchasing decisions.

The rational segment suggests that a consumer's need for a products information is important. The role of communication under the rational segment is to "inform and persuade" (Taylor, 1999, p. 13).

#### **IV. RESULTS**

This exploratory research attempts to find frequencies among elements, emotions, advertising functions and creative strategies within viral advertisements. The central research questions ask what frequent elements and emotions are present in viral advertisements, what advertising functions are being used, and what creative strategies are being used based on Taylors Six-Segment Message Strategy Wheel.

Table 2 indicates that product presentation presence in viral advertisements between 2013 and 2015 is very limited. In 22 of the 30 viral advertisements, product presentation was not emphasized or displayed within the video. This has been a typical approach in viral advertisements as compared to traditional advertisements. Animals and children also did not have a significant presence in viral advertisements as expected. Short videos were classified as anything under three minutes, while long videos were classified as anything over three minutes.

Although there is not a significant difference in the video length, videos that were under three minutes had a higher frequency in this sample of viral advertisements.

<b>Element</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Short Length	17	57%
Long Length	13	43%
Animals	8	27%
Children	11	37%
Product Presentation	8	27%

Table 3 indicates that both funny and heartwarming videos, which emit positive emotions, are much more frequent in viral advertisements. Heartwarming emotions were emitted from 50% of the viral advertisements in this sample, while humorous emotions were emitted from 30% of the videos. The sample consisted of 80% of the viral advertisements being classified under positive emotions. Out of this sample, there were no videos that emitted sad or angry emotions from any of the five coders. Six of the videos (20%) did not emit any of the four main emotions that were listed, which resulted in another option for an emotion labeled as ‘other’. The coders describe the videos labeled ‘other’ as making them feel confused or detached about the video’s emotional purpose.

<b>Emotion</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Humor	9	30%
Heartwarming	15	50%
Sad	0	0%
Angry	0	0%
Other	6	20%

Between traditional and viral advertising, the advertising functions differ significantly, which is shown in Table 4. While traditional advertising has been known to utilize a call to action in their advertisements, viral advertising is more concerned with their brand and getting their name out there. Branding, as an advertising function, was displayed in 80% of the viral advertisements, while only 17% presented a call to action by telling people to join a hashtag movement or participate in an online event. Only one viral advertisement displayed extensive information on their brand and product.

**Table 4 - Advertising Function** n = 30

	Frequency	Percentage
Branding	24	80%
Call to Action	5	17%
Provide Information	1	3%

Taylor's Six-Segment Message Strategy Wheel was used to analyze the viral advertisements from the sample used in this study. Table 5 indicates that 43% of the videos were categorized under the ritual view, while 37% were categorized under the transmission view. Since Taylor's model for analyzing advertisements was created in 1999 and is dated, some of the recent viral advertisements were not able to be classified under either the ritual or transmission category. Six viral advertisements were classified under N/A rather than being categorized under either the transmission or ritual view. This study went further to analyze the ritual and transmission subcategories for each viral video. Table 6 indicates that there was a various outcome of subcategories when analyzing the viral videos. Under the creative strategies section, many of the viral advertisements were categorized under ego, routine, or N/A. As discussed

earlier, a portion of the videos (20%) were unable to be categorized under any of the creative strategies due to Taylor's method being dated for this current study's purpose.

**Table 5 - Transmission View** n = 30

	Frequency	Percentage
Transmission	11	37%
Ritual	13	43%
N/A	6	20%

**Table 6 - Creative Strategies** n = 30

	Frequency	Percentage
Ration	1	3%
Acute	4	14%
Routine	6	20%
Ego	10	33%
Social	3	10%
Sensory	0	0%
N/A	6	20%

## V. DISCUSSION

The booming of viral advertisements has changed the game for online advertising as advertisers now rely on consumers to share these advertisements, which are making media planners and buyers obsolete. This study analyzed 30 viral advertisements in attempt to find frequencies among elements, emotions, advertising functions and creative strategies within these videos. Overall, positive emotions emitted from heartwarming and funny viral advertisements, were much more frequent than other emotions, which is consistent with previous research. Animals and children were not as frequently used in advertisements as originally expected. Although companies such as Budwesier and Purina have been very successful in using animals

in their viral advertisements, using animals in other companies or brands advertising may not effectively tell a story or be relevant to the brand's industry. There was not a significant difference in the length of viral advertisements, but a larger portion of the videos were classified as short videos, being under three minutes.

As expected, the main advertising function for viral advertisements was to create brand awareness, rather than propose a call to action like the majority of traditional advertisements do. We see this in 80% of the advertisements above as they carefully and thoughtfully create viral advertisements to promote brand awareness. These results are also consistent with Golan and Zaidner's (2008) study which finds that 70% of advertisements advertising function is branding. When product presentation is low and emotional appeals are high, typically the advertising function will be branding, which we reveal in this study.

When using Taylor's Six-Segment Message Strategy Wheel, some of the choices were difficult to choose or were not able to come to a conclusion. This may be in part that his model was originally used for traditional advertising in 1999 and may not be relevant or applicable to some of the viral advertisements created in the past few years. Since viral advertisements and traditional advertisements differ so much, it is difficult to apply some of the creative strategies to certain videos since they are fairly new and have many different characteristics than traditional advertisements. Among the five coders, the majority of elements, emotions and strategies coded were high in agreement. Few disagreements arose when coding for emotions and creative strategies.

The ability to effectively measure emotions that arise from viral videos is still lacking. Accurate measures of emotions are essential in advertising research. But little is still out there about proper and effective ways to measure emotions in advertisements. While there are



numerous ways to measure emotional responses, there is still much more work to be done to find a perfect method.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

In this exploratory research, several characteristics such as: elements, emotions, advertising functions and creative strategies were explored in viral advertisements. Though this paper does not suggest any key strategies or instructions on how to create a viral video, it can be a useful foundation for researchers and advertisers to examine several characteristics in viral advertisements.

There were several limitations over the course of this study. Due to the time constraints for this research to be conducted, the sample was limited. A larger sample of viral videos may reveal different findings than from this study. Although the study only reviews only successful viral advertisements, it may be noteworthy to explore viral advertisements that have had negative effect for future research. Other viral advertisements with negative effects may reveal different findings under the emotions category including anger and sadness, which we did not find present in this current study. Another limitation within this study is self-reporting on emotions. While self-reporting measurement of subjective emotions is user friendly and quick, there are still limitations such as cognitive bias. Studies that are able to fund neuroscience brain imaging as a measurement of emotions would be most reliable. By directly analyzing the brain for emotions during advertisements, the results would bypass all limitations that you would normally find in self-reporting measures.

While there is no step-by-step guide to creating viral advertisements, continuing research on viral advertisements as well as social media's influence should be an important topic for

advertisers and researchers in order to understand the key to successfully creating and disseminating viral videos.

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