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## A means to an end: Using political satire to go viral



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### ABSTRACT

With the rise of video sharing giants like Youtube and Google Video, coupled with increased broadband connectivity and improved sharing functionality across social networking sites, the role of the viral video has been cemented in many IMC strategies. While most agree about the importance of better understanding viral marketing, there is less agreement about what makes content become viral. While some content gets viewed by millions of people, others struggle to gain viral traction. Content specific, intrapersonal and interpersonal reasons have been proposed for viral marketing success. This paper focuses on the intrapersonal reasons for content going viral in the context of political satire. More specifically, the role of emotion in the spread of content online, is investigated. Political satire focuses on gaining entertainment from politics. Satire, and specifically political satire, forms part of using humour in advertising and has been influential in shifting public opinion since ancient Greece. This study compares success and unsuccessful viral campaigns that used political satire, by first analysing the online comments that viewers made about the video. Following these findings, an experiment is conducted and the influence of intensity, creativity, humour and utility on virality is modelled, controlling for valence and previous exposure. The findings suggest that, when using political satire in viral campaigns, creativity and the intensity of the emotions felt are key influencing factors in whether videos get “shared” or “liked”. Therefore, while many authors contend that particular emotions or positive content has a greater likelihood to become viral, this paper shows that it is not the particular emotion, but the intensity with which that emotion was felt that drives viral success.

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### 1. Introduction

The “connection generation” craves interaction with and connection to vast social networks (Pintado, 2009) through the sharing of information, photos, opinions, entertainment and news. This sharing comes in the form of electronic word-of-mouth or eWOM (Nelson-Field, Riebe, & Newstead, 2011) and provides marketing and communication managers with unparalleled opportunity to reach a large number of consumers quickly, and to interact with them. Viral marketing is a form of WOM (Blomström, Lind, & Persson, 2012; Porter, 2006; Rodic & Koivisto, 2012), and a marketing communications strategy (Rodic & Koivisto, 2012), that attempts to engage and affect consumers. These consumers, in turn, spread the communicated message further through different social media (Blomström et al., 2012). With the ever increasing growth of the internet and the rise of social network sites, viral marketing has cemented itself in the marketing and corporate agenda.

While many videos that went viral in the past were “lucky” spin-offs from advertising campaigns, marketers are increasingly making communicating through social media platforms a central part of their communication strategy. Nelson-Field et al. (2011) state that, with the rise of video sharing giants like Youtube and Google Video, coupled with

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increased broadband connectivity and improved sharing functionality across social networking sites, the role of the viral video has been cemented in many IMC strategies. This is evident from the transfer of advertising budgets from TV advertising, search and direct response campaigns, to viral video campaigns.

While most agree about the importance of better understanding viral marketing, there is less agreement about what makes content become viral. While some content gets viewed by millions of people, others struggle to gain viral traction. *Content specific*, *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* reasons have been proposed for viral marketing success. Authors espousing *content-specific* explanations, argue that viral content often has utility (Izawa, 2010). In other words, content gets spread across social networks because of its informational and value contribution. *Intrapersonal* reasons often centre around the emotional reaction that viewers have after consuming viral content, as well as the impression that it leaves on viewers (Izawa, 2010). These authors argue that it is how viral content connects emotionally with viewers (Dobele, Lindgreen, Beverland, Vanhamme, & Van Wijk, 2007), and often focus on the spread of positive versus negative content online (Eckler & Bolls, 2011; Rodic & Koivisto, 2012). Others state that it is the extent to which the emotion is felt (or the *intensity* with which the emotion is felt) or the specific emotion, and not simply a case of affect (Berger & Milkman, 2009; Nelson-Field et al., 2011).

Finally, *interpersonal* justifications are concerned with the social motivations for the spread of content online, and suggest that passing along content online builds social networks and social capital, it is important for society, and that people anticipate that others would feel happy and grateful to them for sharing viral content (Izawa, 2010). Regardless of the reason proffered, very little empirical evidence exists to support these claims (Nelson-Field et al., 2011) supporting the call for further research on what makes content viral.

A recently successful viral campaign made use of political satire. Political satire focuses on gaining entertainment from politics, and differs from political protest or political assent in that it does not necessarily have an agenda, and does not necessarily seek to influence the political process. Satire, and specifically political satire, forms part of using humour in advertising and has been influential in shifting public opinion since ancient Greece (Bal, Pitt, Berthon, & DesAutels, 2009). Mascha (2008), for example, states that political satire was critical in the rise of fascism. It entails the use of ridicule, irony or sarcasm to lampoon someone or something, and is designed to generate laughter (Bal et al., 2009).

In a country with a strong political history, using political satire in a viral campaign in South Africa is risky for various reasons. First, because “forwarding” or “liking” online content is a permanent act of communicating to many people at once, one would imagine that social network users are hesitant to associate with political content. Especially when sharing online content is a way to connect with others and to build community (Izawa, 2010), and sharing online content has permanent social implications. Two, a company runs the risk of alienating certain markets because of their political affiliation. This is especially true in the divided and often tumultuous South African political context. Third, it is unclear what the effect of such an advertising campaign would be on the reputation of a company.

Yet some of these viral campaigns are extremely successful, while others are not. Political satire has been systematically neglected by researchers (Mascha, 2008). This study aims to contribute to both viral marketing and political satire literature, by investigating the interplay between content and emotion in viral campaigns that use political satire.

Researchers are increasingly using viral videos as the subject of their analysis in viral marketing (see Eckler & Bolls, 2011; Henke, n.d.; Izawa, 2010; Lagger, Lux, & Marques, 2011; Nelson-Field et al., 2011). More than three quarters of broadband users are regularly watching or downloading video content (Madden, 2007 in Reyneke, 2011). Because of the popularity of the medium, many companies have placed their ads on video sharing sites like Youtube to increase brand awareness and stimulate conversation about the brand (Reyneke, 2011). Reyneke (2011) also states that the increasing popularity of sites like Youtube, is changing the advertising landscape.

Traditional advertising research tools like surveys, rating services and viewer response profiles, may not be as effective in measuring conversation about a viral video. Traditional methods may also not be able to capture the nuances of an environment where consumer feedback to content is networked, rather than one-way (Reyneke, 2011). These consumer dialogues may provide marketing and communication managers with valuable insight into why some videos have gone viral and others have not. This paper starts off with an analysis of two online videos that used political satire to go viral. One was successful, the other was not. The design of this study, as well as the data and findings are discussed in the following section. Based on the findings from this study, an experiment is conducted to better understand the success factors of these two viral videos. The design and results of the second study is discussed in section three. This is followed by a discussion of the findings of both studies in the conclusions and managerial implications section. The paper ends with a brief summary of the possible limitations of the study, followed by suggestions for future research.

## 2. Study 1: a field study of viewers' comments

The first study used an exploratory approach to better understand the use of political satire in a viral campaign. Content analysis was done on viewers' comments of two Youtube videos. The selected videos as well as the process that was followed to analyse their comments, are discussed in the section below.

### 2.1. Data

While traditional viral marketing research focused on the spread of emails, and the majority of research in this area have used email, customer reviews and online forums, researchers are increasingly using viral videos as the subject of their

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