Why Do Creators Want to Craft Viral Content?

An Honors Thesis

by

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Abstract

Viral content seems to be all the talk these days. People are constantly asked whether or not they have seen the latest viral YouTube, Vine, or Buzzfeed video. As a result, creators are trying to find a way to tap into this viral potential, get their video shared, and get as many people as possible to watch their video—and I, as a YouTube video creator, want to tap into this viral potential as well. In this creative endeavor, I attempt to create a viral YouTube video, using insights from viral marketer Jonah Berger, author Malcolm Gladwell, and YouTube star Freddie Wong. I then share my insights learned from this journey of trying to craft viral content, explaining how my focus shifted from initially wanting to craft viral content to now wanting to make content that I genuinely enjoy making.

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Creative Project Video Artifact:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLWwICCcn04
Why Do Creators Want to Craft Viral Content?

In 2010, I discovered a website that would forever change the course of my life: www.YouTube.com. This was not just because it had entertaining cat videos or videos of one sibling biting another sibling’s finger; it was because this is where I discovered a handful of my role models. They released magical videos that always made me wonder how they did what they did and gave me a unique sense of cool whenever I watched one of their videos. These YouTubers, like MysteryGuitarman, Freddie Wong, and others inspired my desire to pick up the video camera and eventually head off to college studying video production. Because these YouTubers were my heroes and role models, I wanted to be like them. I wanted to have the same status as a YouTuber that they had. I wanted to have a viral YouTube video – one that is shared and spread around, resulting in millions of views. This paper is my journey to discover what makes a YouTube video go viral.

This quest, though, was much harder than I originally thought it would be. In fact, I personally try my hand at making a video and try to load it with viral potential, revealing the difficulties that go with crafting viral content. After researching and exploring many different articles and texts, I chose three main texts that focus on crafting ideas that spread, creating success on YouTube, and finding the “cool”, all that I thought would lead to the coveted viral video. After investigating these different avenues for virality, I question the reason for creating
viral content. I then decide that my goal as a creator is not to craft viral content, but to focus on crafting content that I genuinely enjoy making.

I did not think that making a viral YouTube video was easy, though Freddie Wong and MysteryGuitarMan make it seem so. Their videos have an aura of "coolness" around them that begs to be shared, driving my desire to tell my friends that they have to look at their latest creation. To start my search of this aura of "cool" and how to tap into this desire to share that their videos seem to have mastered, I studied viral marketer Jonah Berger’s book *Contagious*. In this, he argues that there are ingredients that can be sprinkled on ideas that will make them much more viral. For example, Berger offers up a concept called "social currency" (Berger 36), in which he insists that people will share content if it makes them seem cool, smart, or in the know, which explains my impulse to share this cool, unique YouTube content with my friends. He offers up examples like a series of videos showing a blender blending different random everyday objects and a lounge called "Please Don’t Tell" that both show off inner remarkability and make people feel like insiders that know knowledge others may not know (Berger 181).

Berger, along with his social currency idea, has other theories or ingredients he suggests feed into a viral video, such as placing triggers that remind people of your video or idea, creating a piece that is emotionally arouses the audience, making the idea or video public and imitable, revealing practical value, and telling a compelling story, all of which can be found and investigated in his book *Contagious*. For the purpose of this investigation, and because social currency seems to be the major player in modern pop culture for viral content, I will focus on this. Furthermore, Berger even offers up free resources on his personal website www.jonahberger.com that show anyone how to craft this contagious content. This information is readily available to anyone, yet not everyone can craft this type of viral content. In a way, it’s
like a musician who has a mastery of music theory yet cannot translate this knowledge in a
practical way. Thus, with a grasp of an idea of the ingredients for viral success, I searched to find
the opinion of someone who worked closely with the YouTube platform so that I could transfer
this theory into practice - and ran into an article by Freddie Wong.

In this article titled "The Secrets of YouTube Success", Freddie Wong outlines many of
the different decisions that go into creating a video. He talks about creating content on a
consistent basis, the importance of a content-centric approach, and the number one rule for
content: to make content that you genuinely enjoy making. He mentions how a consistent release
schedule will help maintain a consistent audience. In turn, this audience can become your major
fanbase that will be most likely to share your content and videos when it comes out. With the
content-centric approach, he advises one to make content by asking "How do I make a video that
people want to watch?" instead of asking "How do I get people to watch my video?", which
serves as an important distinction that places the emphasis on the crafting of contagious content
instead of the crafting of a contagious plan to get people to watch.

Most importantly for this paper, though, he outlines the differences between "good"
videos and "sticky" (or viral) videos. He notes that, in order to tap into viral potential, one must
ask the question, "What is the first impulse a viewer will have after they see this video?" He
mentions that the impulse that is desired for a viral video is to be one that they want to pass along
to their friends immediately (Wong). This notion of crafting content for this impulse appears
here from Wong as well as in Berger's argument with social currency. They both see the
importance of crafting the video with the idea of virality in mind, much like what I had originally
set out to do: create a viral video. To take my musician metaphor a step farther, the musician can
choose to play music on his guitar that he knows that everyone will like and can play 
outrageously or uniquely to aim to get people to talk.

Wong also adds that even if something is a fantastic work of art, such as an award­
winning short film, this does not mean that they will get passed around. He says that if the goal is 
to be passed around, that desire needs to be tapped into. Again, with the musician example, he 
can play a beautiful piece on the guitar and still have no one listen to him. This could be for a 
number of reasons, but the core idea is that there are videos out there that are critically-acclaimed 
to be wonderful works of art and there are songs that fall under the same category that both lack 
virality. From this, the question gets raised of how do we know what will want to be passed 
around? How do we know what will be cool enough or good enough to be passed around?

I researched an article by Malcolm Gladwell called “The Coolhunt”, which more or less 
supports Freddie Wong’s previous idea of the importance of a consistent audience and how this 
comes full circle with social currency. To summarize, the article is about the art of finding things 
that are cool or what people think are cool. In the context of the article, “cool” represents the 
ideas that are stylish or awesome. Through this article, Gladwell approaches this search of cool 
by trying to find out if it’s possible to predict what will be cool. He inevitably concludes that the 
key to coolhunting is “to look for cool people first and cool things later. Since cool things are 
always changing, you can’t look for them, because the very fact they are cool means you have no 
idea what to look for. Cool people, on the other hand, are a constant.” (Gladwell). This idea of 
finding the cool people first who will make the cool things relates nicely to the idea of a 
consistent audience. This consistent audience for a YouTuber, called subscribers, are essentially 
the people who are saying that this particular person is cool. They promote and endorse this 
YouTuber and their channel because they think he or she is cool and, if they make content they
think is cool, then they will share it to others because they want to seem cool themselves, like Berger would suggest with his social currency theory.

With these ideas in mind from these three texts, I moved forward with planning my own video. From the beginning, I immediately noticed the troubles that can come with trying to craft contagious content. For starters, I immediately began to ask, “What kind of video would go viral?” as if my main reason for creating videos is to simply make one that would get noticed by many people. I had trouble even trying to come up with an idea to start with because of how consumed I was with this desirable idea of finding what would go viral. Even though I felt like I had at least a starting point of knowledge for crafting contagious content, I had no idea what to do to apply this knowledge to my own line of work. I was this musician with knowledge of theory but no idea of how to translate it to play music.

I ventured back into my texts and tried to find a starting point to work off of. In my search, I located a section in Freddie Wong’s article that outlines an important point, “It’s stupid to worry about what the rest of the internet wants to see... it matters what you enjoy making. Because YouTube takes so much time and energy, if you make things only for an audience, you’re doomed to failure because you’ll hate doing this, and you won’t put in the amount of necessary time.” (Wong). As Wong suggests by saying one should create what he or she enjoys making, Gladwell’s ultimate cool person also aligns with this individuality, staying that a cool person is, “someone who has definitely set himself apart from everybody else, who doesn’t look like his peers.” (Gladwell). With this, instead of trying to start my video from the concept of what would go viral by catering to what other people want, I tried to start from an idea of a video that I myself would enjoy watching myself and make something that shows my unique vision and individuality.
Because my favorite types of videos to watch are those that are music-centered, I started there for my video concept. To get the ball rolling creatively, I placed a restriction on myself of only using an acoustic guitar. By limiting myself to only one instrument, I would force myself to think within the limitations and compose a song. As I began laying down the different layers of the song, the idea of making the song using only one instrument became the main concept and I rolled with it. Because I had the idea of “cool” fresh in my mind, I thought that having an entire song played only by a single acoustic guitar layered on top of one another would hopefully qualify as cool. I hoped that this might inspire one to think that their friends must see this video because this person used only a single instrument to compose this song.

As I was writing the music for this piece, I also visualized what the video might look like and tried to establish an aesthetic. The different guitars slowly built up to the final piece and the entire song together seemed pretty happy, which is in contrast to a melancholy sound the piece starts with. In a way, they felt like many different kinds of tones put together with the only bond between the tones being that they are all from the acoustic guitar, though tonally they can feel quite different. From this, I thought of the idea to have each of the acoustic guitar tracks be represented by a single shot on camera with different, distracting elements included in the frame. For example, in the opening shot, the guitarist is shown with shorts on, outside of his car, playing a guitar. This does not seem like the ordinary scene and the shots after this one continually follow this pattern of chaos. Altogether, these shots attempt to illustrate the chaos surrounding each of the guitars, yet the one thing that connects them is that they all play the acoustic guitar.

For the overall structure of the piece, rather than telling a traditional cause and effect story, this video aims to tell a story that Sam and Niko from the popular YouTube channel “CorridorDigital” would label as a story of escalation, where an idea is repeated and escalated
from beginning to end (SamAndNiko). The main point of virality I was aiming for is the concept of cool and I was hoping to express this particular song through this escalation story for the highest viral potential. Because the video was full of purposefully-placed, escalating, distracting elements, I named the video, “What is the Meaning of This?” to try to get the audience to derive meaning from the piece from their observation. As another point of trying to add viral potential, I hoped that people would share this video asking their friends what they thought this video meant.

With these elements in place, I released this video on YouTube - and, it did not go viral.

Why? Why did it not go viral? As I looked over the video and over the materials I used to research virality, there were holes that I needed to fill. However, there was something that resonated with me more from this process than simply figuring out why this particular piece did not spread like I intended. For example, the overall video could be more entertaining as a whole, my production value and video quality could definitely be better, I could build up a subscriber base, the story could be easy to follow instead of reflective, and many other things. But, the main bits of knowledge I figured out was more from the process and the consequent answering of the question, “Why do I want something to go viral, anyway?”

What does having a video go viral mean to me? As I look at the question now, I think that it would be cool to have a video go viral—to be able to say that you made a video go viral would be a pretty interesting thing to be able to bring up. But is that enough? Is simply making a video go viral for the sake of it going viral—is that worthy enough of a reason or is that too trivial?

What is the point of studying the science of virality? When I think about the reasons for wanting something to go viral, I begin to think that I’ve been approaching it from the wrong angle. Instead of coming at virality from the angle of seeing that as the end goal or the marker for success, maybe I should see it as a way to take a compelling idea or an artistic work and get it
out to as many people that need to see it. In a practical sense, the ability to create viral content would be especially useful to those who have a compelling message that needs to be spread to people and need to package and create the content in a way that it gets shared so that the highest number of people can see it. That way, instead of creating viral content just to be viral, this content becomes viral so that it can positively impact the greatest number of people.

At first, I researched and tried to find a way to make videos that would go viral on YouTube. After diving in headfirst, doing research, and attempting to craft a viral video, I discovered that, at least for me, aiming for virality just for virality’s sake perhaps is not what I want. Instead, I want to find a way to start with an idea or concept and then go outward. Even when I was crafting this video, I stumbled upon this idea of starting with virality and then eventually switched to starting with an idea and going outward. Even so, whenever I thought about an artistic choice or aesthetic decision, my mind would aim for what would go viral instead of what would best tell my story. In this way, the question seems to narrow down to the possibility that content can either be true to the art or be viral, but potentially not mutually exclusive. Or, is it that the choices that best tell the story are the same ones that will resonate the most and be the most viral?

What does all of this mean moving forward? Does this mean I drop my pursuit of the video that will go viral? I don’t think so. From this process of researching and applying viral concepts, I’ve went through a bit of self-discovery that makes me want to find that viral video even more - but just when it comes from videos I genuinely enjoy making myself instead of from making videos I think others want to see. Early on in Wong’s “Secrets of YouTube Success” article, he notes that it’s essential to define what success means to you (Wong). My success, to start, was simply to craft a viral video for viral video’s sake, as if I just wanted to prove that I
could do it. Now, my goal is not to necessarily make a viral video, but to make and create videos
that I am happy with, to continually progress in skill, and tell moving stories that can impact
people’s lives. Right now, my goal should not be to solely craft viral videos, but to create and tell
a story in the most authentic and powerful way possible first. If Gladwell suggests that the cool is
something that cannot be chased, I should first focus on making and perfecting my content and
develop my individual style and, indirectly, develop a sense of coolness. With this coolness, then
the social currency that Berger suggests will pull through to help my video content spread.
Simply put, instead of being a virality-focused content creator, I want to be an art-focused
content creator whose content spreads because it’s something that I want create and express, not
what others want to see.

So, what is the answer? What makes a YouTube video go viral? It can be the idea of cool
or the notion of social currency, or any of the other theories mentioned by Jonah Berger in his
book. Or, it can be slowly building up an audience with a consistent schedule and creating
content that people want to watch, as Wong would suggest. The main takeaway from this
investigation of virality is that finding purposeful virality is maybe the hardest part of the journey
to virality. Why is it that you want something to go viral? As I look retroactively at the different
texts, perhaps the virality is, in Berger’s case, to spread a particular company’s message so that
they can create more revenue. Or, in Gladwell’s case, to get a certain fashion to get into style so
that more of that product will sell. Or, in Wong’s case, to find an audience to get behind his work
so that he can make a living doing YouTube videos. For artists, is it worth it to create content
that will go viral if it is not representative of what you truly like? Is integrity potentially lost by
trying to cater to packaging or creating content in a way that is based on what will be well-
received?
As I move forward with my video creating, my goal no longer is to create a viral video. Instead, I hope to create content that I truly and genuinely like, that I would want to watch, and content that people will find entertaining. Although I can use the viral concepts and theories to help guide decision making, maybe these will only be used if they better tell my story or help make my video reach those goals I’ve outlined. I have ideas as to what makes a YouTube video go viral, but am not exactly certain. However, I do have a better grasp of my artistic direction because of this viral experiment that will help guide my content creating from now on. Now, I’m the musician with an idea of what kind of music people want to hear, but am deciding to keep pursuing my own artistic direction because that’s what I genuinely enjoy playing.
Works Cited


