The Pursuit of Cultural Impact In the Age of Virality: Measuring Long-Term Brand Impact

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Virality used to be a term rarely used outside the medical field, but today it has become a commonly used phrase in the digital marketing industry to describe content that gains a rapid amount of attention within a short period of time. How does this attention accumulate so rapidly; is it mere chance or is there a strategy behind it? Through a historical overview of the development of digital marketing, and the analysis of three viral campaigns, I will attempt to show that virality is achieved through a variety of creative methods, but is ultimately not controlled by advertisers alone. However, there is also a more effective way for digital marketing professionals to evaluate the effectiveness of their campaigns: their long term cultural impact.

Acknowledgements

Process Analysis Statement

Having such a diverse set of interests and passions, the thesis creation process for me begins with the process of deciding upon a topic. I did not lack options; I spent several weeks during the spring semester agonizing over my various loves, and also keeping up with my classes at the time.

Ultimately, what struck me as the inspiration for this paper was class material. I was assigned to watch a TED Talk by Marcus Collins for one of my major classes. In that TED Talk, Marcus looks into what it means for a video to "go viral" and how society uses virality to measure the level of success a piece of online content may have. This really sparked my interest because I had seen my share of viral phenomenon on the Internet, but had never really considered how that phenomenon occurs. As an advertising major, the importance of building strong strategy behind campaigns is stressed in all of our courses. Knowing that, and also recognizing the sense of randomness surrounding viral content, I knew this was something worth digging into.

Deciding my topic also helped me solidify the choice to construct a more formal research paper for my thesis project. I have worked part-time as a graphic designer for the majority of my college career, and plan to continue to pursue design in my career, however; I already have a wide range of creative projects that highlight my design sense and skills. I wanted to take on a research based project, because it was a new challenge to unpack. Additionally, I see the possibility of graduate school in my future, so I want to further familiarize myself with large scale research projects.

This project certainly was a challenge at times. I learned a lot about myself and the importance of creating structure around this project. I expressed this to my advisor, Professor

Lukens, and we worked together to establish a timeline for the fall semester, so that I would confidently complete my thesis prior to graduation. One of the best deadlines we established was structuring the duration of the project into two major halves: research and writing.

I spent August – mid October researching my topic, without putting pressure on myself to physically write anything of my own. I appreciated this time because it bred a deeper curiosity for my topic. It was absolutely fascinating to dig into the complicated history of how brands and consumers communicate online. When you log into Twitter or browse through YouTube, there is so much taken for granted. This project taught me there is more going on behind the scenes than many people realize. I also learned that while the Internet is still a recent invention in the timeline of human history, it is still has history and has evolved since its inception.

Making these realizations through my research, I also developed an outline at this stage to establish the scope of my project. Professor Lukens and I both recognized the potential for this topic to be highly generalized, or highly specific. Creating a research outline helped me find a middle ground, where I could be specific in understanding virality through specific case studies, but I could also generalize how these case studies illuminate wider trends in viral content.

After the research stage was past, I ran into a bit of road block trying to start the writing process at the end of October. Being in a very creative major, I have never written a paper of this length before in my college career. The sheer idea of a 25 - 30 page pager was daunting. I will attempt at first it was paralyzing. However, I know that I work better when I can break down big daunting tasks into smaller goals for myself. I treated each section of my research as its own small thesis paper. I gave myself the freedom to write these completely separately because it helped remove the pressure to write to a page count requirement.

Eventually, I stepped back and realized all those sections were beginning to solidify into one larger paper naturally. Putting all the separate sections into one Word document, was a breakthrough moment for me. That was the first time I recognized this project was more than an abstract, distant future goal. The end was in sight! In sight, but there was still a lot of work to do. Over the next several weeks, I begin to communicate with Professor Lukens much more frequently. We exchanged feedback digitally regularly, and he encouraged me to fully develop my claims.

At the end of it all, I am extremely proud to say that I accomplished this daunting task. This paper has something valuable to say, and I know I have said it well. I am eager to ring the bell and finish my Honors College career with overwhelming pride.

Introduction

In the span of communications history, digital marketing is a relatively new phenomenon and the Internet itself is a very new communication medium. Yet, today it feels as though almost anyone and anything can become an Internet sensation in a matter of mere minutes. This phenomenon of virality, or the rapid spread of content through the means of social media and digital networks, is apparent in branded content and user-generated content alike. When it comes to a brand gaining rapid amounts of attention quickly (going viral), is it only a matter of chance? If it is chance that ultimately dictates a campaign's success, why are marketers today constantly seeking virality?

While there are countless casual blog posts and informational videos trying to unpack those questions, there is an overall lack of rigorous academic study in the sphere of social videos and digitally-driven commercial campaigns. In her research with the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute at the University of South Australia, Dr. Karen Nelson-Field recognizes that "While many marketers may think that much of the research in the social video space is relevant, in the absence of rigor it cannot be." (2013, p. 8). This paper will attempt to increase the rigor of the research in this sphere via an in-depth review of both academic and industry sources, as well as original case study analysis.

To unpack the marketer's motivation behind seeking virality, a survey of Internet history and consumer-corporate communications is provided, contextualizing the ecosphere where viral campaigns exist. Then, I will evaluate three successful viral marketing campaigns that make use of a variety of digital mediums, and qualify their success. Looking at these successful campaigns is useful to understand the broad variety of content present across branded videos. Through the synthesis of these case studies, it is apparent that there are a variety of different methods to

achieve virality, but also something happens outside the control of advertisers in order for the video to "go viral".

Ultimately, this paper will argue that while "going viral", or achieving a high number of shares in the digital space, is admirable, virality cannot be used as a proper measurement of a successful digital marketing campaign. Rather, digital campaigns must be evaluated on their ability to infiltrate and engrain themselves within a consumer group's culture. When this occurs, then a campaign will have a longer-term impact and ultimately gain more success than a generic "viral video" could on its own.

History of The Digital Landscape

Before campaigns can be evaluated as successful or unsuccessful in digital spaces, there needs to be a basic understanding of how marketing on the Internet emerged. The birth of the Internet has changed how individual consumers communicate with one another and simultaneously, how brands can communicate with them. The sharing potential of the Internet is a direct antecedent to the modern-day phenomenon of virality. It is important to understand how the Internet has impacted consumer interactions as well as corporate communication since both groups play such a pivotal part in the success of online, branded content.

The idea of a shared knowledge among people, for our purposes a working definition of the Internet, was conceptualized years prior to the technology that made this magical connection network possible. In his book *World Brain*, H.G. Wells pondered upon the potential for a 'world encyclopedia' where all of the knowledge across humankind would live in one set of volumes that "would be the mental background of every intelligent man in the world" (Wells, 1936, p. 20). As opposed to the distribution of knowledge across many places, Wells' believed

knowledge would be compiled into one place; allowing academics, journalists, and common folk – groups that were seemingly different - to access a collective intelligence, and ultimately recognize themselves as fundamentally similar. At the very minimum, the Internet collected a much larger group of people in one place than physical space could always allow. Wells' theory of a "world brain" was not practical or even possible with the technology available in the 18th century, but when the technology finally became available, the World Wide Web reflected the realization of Wells' World Brain.

The Internet is a collective culmination of human knowledge, and this new sea of knowledge changed the landscape of communication both for consumers and for companies. Now, companies began to provide information to consumers via a website and consumers consumed information about products without direct, personal contact with the brand. Even in the event that a company did not have their own website, consumers could use search engines to find the information they needed. This means that consumers were no longer using advertisements as their sole method of receiving product information: "As consumers stopped attending to advertisements for their product information needs and started accessing the web in their own terms, advertisers responded by making ads less informative and more entertaining." (Teixeira, 2014, p. 7). As ads got more entertaining, it was clear that companies also needed to think beyond their basic informational format. Today, 90 percent of social video sharing "can be explained by the fact that they are able to elicit high-arousal positive emotions." (Nelson-Field, 2013, p. 67). Positive emotions such as hilarity, astonishment, inspiration, or exhilaration are commonly used in advertising, in part, because the long-term effect of associating a brand with a negative emotion is still unknown (Nelson-Field, 2013, p. 26). The high arousal piece is key because with the sheer amount of branded content shared digitally, it is not enough for

companies to have advertisements that are just funny: they need to be hilarious. In the midst of

that hilarity, they still need to introduce their product and give the consumer a taste of why that

product benefits them.

In order to create those high arousal emotions, companies need to find a key insight with

their audience because "people don't have time to figure out what your brand stands for. It's up

to you to make your brand stand for something." (Sullivan & Boches, 2016, p. 27). A key insight

is not only defining what the company stands for, but also defining how that value intersects with

the interests and desires of the consumer. Key insights are the secret to infiltrating the

consumer's attention because it puts them and their experiences at the center, with the brand and

product as a support of who they are. People tend to consider their experiences, or their

interactions with others, as a more important part of their self-concept than material possessions

(Carter & Gilovich, 2012, p. 1313). If experiences are more central to identity than possessions,

then it is smart for brands to emphasize their value in helping the consumer achieve more

pleasurable life experiences.

Companies are looking to a consumer's communities to help define what those

pleasurable experiences might be for any particular set of individuals. The Internet can create a

community unlike communities we have previously witnessed in the course of humanity.

Internet communities, or "social media" as they were referred to beginning in the late 1990s

(Bercovici, 2010, n.a.), are not dictated by the confines of time and space, but rather centralize

groups of people around their shared interests: the perfect scenario for brands looking to make an

impact. Additionally, there is more autonomy given to the individual within social media as

opposed to face-to-face communications because of the barrier of a screen: "Everyone can 'talk'

or input wherever they wish, rather than having to 'take turns' [….] No one can be interrupted or

shut down." (Hiltz & Turoff, p. 29). Since customers are all given an equal platform to speak on

social media, it is easier for the individual consumer to gain confidence in sharing their opinions

more openly. As consumers gain confidence, brands interact with these confident consumers

directly through the same communication channels. While there are positives and negatives to

this autonomy, it gives brands a way to interact with a slightly more confident consumer, a

consumer who is more likely to make a final purchase decision.

However, companies were not immediate to catch on to the power of social media,

partially because other forms of digital advertising proved to be more effective in the past. The

first online banner ad was purchased by AT&T in 1994 and it "produced click-through rates of

44% and to put that into perspective, the average click-through rate of a display ad in 2019 is

0.35%." (OKO, 2019). Banner ads, ads displayed at the top of websites encouraging users to

interact with them and click off to a company site, reflected a communication style that was

familiar for companies. Banner ads, like newspaper and magazine ads before them, allowed

companies to send a message out to the users, with very limited channels for users to provide

feedback, other than through a purchase decision.

While display ads were highly effective as an early form of digital marketing, users

quickly learned to ignore them and in some cases, the users even began to block these ads. The

first ad blocking software was invented in 2002 (OKO, 2019), only eight years after the first

banner advertisement was created. A loss in attention, or a removal of the ads from the user's

sight, meant lower click through rates and ultimately, lower profits for companies using banner

advertisements. Companies needed to find a new method to capture the attention of the Internet

user, but that was easier said than done because the customer was no longer in a static position in

the purchase funnel. The purchase funnel breaks down the steps required for a consumer to make

a purchase decision, or action. The model suggests that advertisers must gain a consumer's attention, interest, and desire for a product prior to the consumer taking actual action via a purchase. The model, developed originally by Elias St. Elmo Lewis in 1898, was originally developed when advertising first recognized the importance of putting the consumer at the center of the conversation (Strong, 1925, p. 9). However, in today's marketing culture the consumer is no longer merely the subject of the conversation; they are an integral member of it: "the problem with the purchase funnel today is that the buying process is no longer this linear." (Sullivan & Boches, 2016, p. 233). Consumers no longer seek attention, gain interest, and evoke desire in the same step-by-step process prior to purchase like the purchase funnel model suggests. Even if these stages may still be seen in consumer behavior, the consumer is moving so quickly through these stages it is impossible to isolate one individual stage. Advertisers had to accommodate this by becoming more versatile and creating content that consumers could engage with, no matter their previous awareness or interest in the product being advertised.

Brands began to look for new ways to speak to consumers that would be engaging enough to withstand a user's desire to block the messaging, and simultaneously evade the moving target of the purchase funnel. The secret was in accessing the ability of Internet communities to create conversations among the consumer and the brand. In more traditional mediums like television, there was no ability for a consumer to participate in a conversation with the company; it was more of a "talk at" approach rather an "engage with" approach. This can be seen in how television content was typically evaluated: "Traditional television ratings represent the audience as the primary commodity exchanged through the practices of broadcast media. By contrast, engagement-based models see the audience as a collective of active agents whose labor may generate alternative forms of market value." (Jenkins, 2013, p. 114). In today's digital

landscape, brands can not merely send information at their targeted audience. Rather, they must insert themselves into a conversation that interests the audience, and inspire other conversations outside of the original one. One way that this insertion happens is through the use of video advertising.

Videos capture an audience's attention more quickly than plain text because our brains naturally process images quickly – in as few as 13 milliseconds (Trafton, 2014, n.a) and since the founding of YouTube in 2005, companies have sought after that medium to engage with their customers quickly, and effectively. It did not take long after their founding for YouTube to implement video advertisements; the first attempt was in August of 2006, and the pre-roll video advertisements we are familiar with today began in 2008, only three years after the launch of the platform (Jackson, 2011). However, soon after, ad blocking software evolved to block out these ads when possible, similar to the storyline of banner ads. Once again, brands were left to find a new method for reaching their customers online because the messaging was not able to reach theirs audience as intended.

With all of these advertisement blocking systems in place, how were companies supposed to sell anything? Why hasn't digital marketing died out completely? Brands needed to disguise their advertisements as highly interesting content first, and subliminally insert them into consumer culture. They need to 'go viral'.

What does that mean? There is some debate on who was truly the first person to coin the term "viral marketing". Jeffrey Rayport, a Harvard Business School professor at the time, wrote an article called "The Virus of Marketing" for Fast Company in 1996. He was encouraging marketers to embrace the concept of the virus because "Every marketer aims to have a dramatic impact on thinking and behavior in a target market; every successful virus does exactly that."

(Rayport, 1996). Rayport may be the first documented use of the term viral marketing, but

venture capital firm Draper Fisher Jurvetson may have been the first to truly define it, as

"network-enhanced word of mouth" (Weissman, 2012).

  Viral marketing marks a shift from the basic banner ad to something new and engaging

where consumers become the mouthpieces for companies. Word of mouth is not a new concept,

but with the Internet, more people are accessible to one another, so words and messaging are able

to spread at a faster rate than had ever been possible before.

  Regardless of who was the initial creator of the term, the phrase caught on, because it

truly encapsulates the spectacle marketers were witnessing across the Internet. While Rayport

was writing to an audience of fear-paralyzed marketers, today viral marketing is everywhere. It

seems as though almost anything can go viral, or at least it can try to. Virality at its core is an

exponential curve of influence (Patel, 2017), that marketers need to leverage as a quick way to

achieving greater reach. However as Marcus Collins, a professor at the University of Michigan

and Chief Consumer Connections Officer at Doner Advertising, questions "one must wonder if

virality is truly what we're after or if perhaps there is something far greater worth pursuing."

(Collins, 2017). That something, is the infiltration of a consumer group's culture and identity

through obtaining a key insight, and then constructing a conversation around the brand.

  The way that a brand achieves cultural relevance depends on a myriad of factors

including the brand's personality, the target audience they are aiming to engage with, as well as

the product benefits the brand is trying to sell. To help uncover a few of these methods, we will

critically analyze case studies of viral branded content from three different major companies:

GEICO, Wendy's, and Always. These cases all represent successful campaigns, and as we will

see, they do not achieve widespread success solely due to the number of shares in and of

themselves, but through an infiltration of consumer culture.

<div align="center">**Case Studies**</div>

GEICO

In many cases, viral moments are not isolated moments in time but a single point of

contact with much larger marketing efforts. Marketers know the success of one ad is inherently

connected to the success of an entire campaign because a consumer does not make a purchase

decision based on merely one interaction with the brand (Li, Arava, Dong, Yan, & Pani, 2018).

This evaluation is called multi-touch attribution which is "a marketing effectiveness

measurement technique that takes all of the touchpoints on the consumer journey into

consideration […] so that a marketer can see how much influence each channel has on a sale."

(Nielsen, 2019, n.a.). Multi-touch attribution generally refers to assessing the value of different

advertising tactics within the same campaign, but if we expand that concept, it is clear that

exposure to a brand prior to the current campaign can have a huge impact on purchase decisions

because it makes it more likely for that brand to be a part of the consumer's memory and

predisposed brand preferences (Lee, 2002, 451).

GEICO and their famous gecko are the perfect example. The gecko was introduced for

the first time in 1999 by Martin Agency as a tactic to help customers remember how to

pronounce the brand name (GEICO, n.d.). That small green gecko and the ingenious strategy of

the Martin Agency has transformed GEICO's market share: "Before GEICO signed on with

Martin, it had a 2 percent market share and was the eighth-largest car insurance company in the

United States, according to Dean Jarrett, the agency's chief communications officer. It is now

No. 2, behind State Farm." (Kaufman, 2017).

The gecko set the groundwork for GEICO to have numerous viral hits later down the line by creating a recognizable visual representation of the brand. The contagious personality of the gecko is not only effective in gaining a single, positive response, but it allows for stronger brand recall among consumers, a trend commonly observed among brand mascots (Malik, 2014, p. 137). It also breaks the association of insurance being a boring and burdensome brand category, inspiring GEICO's competitors to follow their lead in creating identifiable brand mascots. Britt Nolan, chief creative director at Leo Burnett and creator of the Mayhem brand mascot for All State, applauded GEICO for the realization that "people don't care that much about insurance; insurance is a burden category, so let's lighten the burden." (Kaufman, 2017, n.a.). After that burden was lifted, GEICO has continued to find success by introducing new characters to support their primary spokes-lizard. One of the most successful campaigns from this new era of GEICO is their "Hump Day" commercial.

In the commercial, Caleb the Camel is walking through a dreary office spreading cheer by asking his employees "Guess what day it is?" The employees mostly ignore him, but eventually an employee responds, "It's hump day." This is followed by a tag at the end of the commercial referencing the brand itself, saying "How happy are folks who save hundreds of dollars switching to GEICO? […] Happier than a camel on hump day." (GEICO, 2018). The subtle irony resonated with the target audience by taking an ordinary experience – midweek blues at the office – and adding something unexpected – a real-life camel walking around.

The concept of Hump Day is not revolutionary. Hump Day is a colloquial idiom used commonly in North American work cultures to describe Wednesdays. Since the 1980s, coworkers have wished each other 'Happy Hump Day' on Wednesdays to celebrate making it to the midpoint, or hump, in the week (Dictionary.com, 2019) So, GEICO is not creating something

completely new and shocking. Instead, they tap into an existing cultural phenomenon and leverage it to position their brand as a necessity for the consumer. In advertising it can be easy to fall into inauthentic, pompous, or flashy language when at the end of the day "the best ideas are truth brought to light in new fresh ways," (Sullivan & Boches, 2016, p. 49). Caleb the Camel's association with hump day recognizes the reality of mundane office life and brings it to light in a new and exciting way for the consumer.

The creation of a long-standing association of the brand with Wednesdays helps this commercial's success span beyond a single moment of virality. Two months after the initial airing of the commercial (which of course was on a Wednesday) the ad was still experiencing high spikes in interest on Wednesdays: "more than two-thirds (67.3%) of its [the Hump Day commercial] shares occur on Wednesdays" (Tullin, 2013) which is noticeably higher than the number of shares the ad incurs on other days of the week.

Success cannot be merely measured based on the metrics of shares however; we also measure the campaign's success in the impacts it had on culture. Marcus Collins comments on this need to look beyond mere metrics or the viral success of content. He proposes the term, 'cultural contagion' to describe the cultural impact of digital content. Cultural contagion "is the spread of ideas, products, messages, and behaviors which take hold in culture." (Collins, 2017).

In evaluating GEICO's Hump Day commercial, we can see that yes – it is a viral success because it achieves high reach after its launch. However, we can also see the campaign-building of a cultural contagion through the long-term adaptation of Hump Day camels into popular culture. In the months after the commercial aired, many celebrities mimicked the visuals of associating a camel with Wednesdays "Hump Day" including the White House and Vice President Biden himself (White House Archived, 2013).

Figure 1: White House Twitter account contributes to the Hump Day trend. Retrieved

from White House Archived Twitter account.

GEICO's Hump Day commercial reinforces what the audience already knew about the

brand and inserts GEICO into the pre-established sociolinguistics of the target audience. Both

these elements helped GEICO achieved long term brand impact through the campaign. The right

combination of humor, familiarity, and expert placement of the ad on a Wednesday, caused the

long-term success of the ad beyond a single viral moment.

Wendy's

Sometimes in order to insert themselves into consumer culture, brands must go through a

bit of a transformation process. This is especially true of brands in crowded product categories,

such as the fast food industry. In the fast food industry, there are more than 50,000 fast food

chains in the United States (Njaramba, 2019) aiming to please very similar customer groups.

Therefore, in order to stand out fast food chains such as Wendy's need to develop a high level of

brand affinity among consumers. Brand affinity is more than mere awareness of a brand, or

brand loyalty; "affinity is when customers invest in your brand, not out of habit or convenience

but because they really believe [and identify] with it." (Keefe, 2018). Typically, brand affinity is

built through emotional appeals, and Wendy's accomplishes this by tapping into the high arousal

emotion of hilarity in their corporate social media. Through unique tactics driven by a sassy tone, Wendy's creates an identity for themselves as more than a restaurant chain, but as a brand that knows how to make the customer laugh through their strategic use of viral content.

Wendy's joined Twitter in July 2009 and as of November 2019, they have tweeted nearly 180,000 times and have gained almost 3.4 million followers (twitter.com/wendys). Since their beginning in 2009, Wendy's social media has always been engaging, but they have continued to expand Twitter as a primary advertising venue due to an increased quantity of users among heir audience using the platform (Cheng, 2018). Among 18 to 24 year old adults in the United States, 45% use Twitter (Smith, 2018), so Wendy's recognizes that Twitter is a key medium to include in their marketing media mix. On Twitter, content is produced and consumed in real time, meaning that it mimics the exchange rate of typical face-to-face conversation (Weltevrede, Helmond & Gerlitz, 2014, p.3), requiring brands and content so this means brands such as Wendy's need to be attentive and ready for whatever their consumers and competitors might throw their way.

Analyzing some of Wendy's early tweets – which for the purposes of this case study, will be defined as all tweets from the main @Wendys Twitter account from July 2009 to July 2012 – there appears to be an evolution as Wendy's gained confidence as a digital brand and social media expanded. These early tweets feel somewhat standard and unoriginal, meaning they lack that unique humorous flair that Wendy's is now known for. The tweets include social media contests, and direct engagement with their consumers, frequently attached to promoting a new product like their Asiago Ranch Chicken Club (Wendy's, 2011). While Wendy's may not have had the wittiest tweets early on, they were building a brand identity for themselves online, as well as a decent following which was essential for brands in the early years of social media. In

order to achieve high levels of brand affinity, a customer must first know who your brand is and what they stand for. Twitter and social media platforms as a whole were very new at this time, so brands who embraced the platforms openly helped to facilitate the entire culture of corporate engagement online.

As more consumers became comfortable engaging on social media, companies began to see high payoff for engaging customers online. In 2015. Twitter and the Applied Marketing Science group – a research group based out of Massachusetts led by MIT Sloan School of Management faculty– analyzed how the public responded to effective Twitter customer service from airline companies. In this study, users often report a higher satisfaction rate with their customer service experience when receiving a Tweet reply than a phone call or in-person experience (Huang, 2015). This indicates that consumers expect a high level of online engagement from brands today, and that this engagement has direct correlation to customer satisfaction. Wendy's recognized this, and engaged consistently with their customers. They also paid particular attention to customers who had experienced a problem at one of their stores, first apologizing for the negative experience and then often, offering another place such as a survey for customers to provide more detailed feedback (Wendy's, 2012).

Yet, there is something missing from this early age of the @Wendys Twitter account: personality. To truly stand out, they need to respond in a clever way to engage with customers beyond customer service. Some of Wendy's customers merely want to gain attention from large corporations in pursuit of their own enjoyment. This group of social media users has been colloquially referred to as "Twitter trolls" and represent "a subculture renowned for ungrammatical speech and unserious arguments" (Pasquale, 2015) In this day and age, the Twitter troll is a lurking presence that is constantly threatening to tear apart social media

strategy. Wendy's takes a smart approach of responding to the trolls in kind: "They send a lot of the basic 'DM us and we'll set this straight' when people have genuine complaints, but they also recognize that a lot of people on Twitter are there to be trolls and Wendy's will troll you right back, harder." (Morris, 2018).

Wendy's' roasting strategy most noticeably began with a series of Tweets on January 2nd, 2017 after a customer questioned whether Wendy's beef was actually fresh every time and the company quipped back "Sorry to hear you think that! But you're wrong, we've only ever used fresh beef since we were founded in 1969." (Wendy's, 2017a). The interaction climaxed after the user, @NHride, said "y'all should give up. @McDonalds got you guys beat with the dope ass breakfast" to which @Wendys bit back with "You don't have to bring them into this just because you forgot refrigerators existed for a second there." (Wendy's, 2017b).

That single clap back received almost 9,000 retweets and nearly 27,000 likes on Twitter. The most successful tweet from Wendy's main competitor McDonald's that same day received 202 retweets and less than 1,000 likes (McDonald's, 2017). For relative data, Wendy's promotional contest for their Asiago Ranch Chicken Club in 2011 received 6 retweets and 1 like in 2011 (Wendy's, 2011). Certainly the number of followers Wendy's had at the time of the roast had increased since that sandwich promotion which is a factor in the drastic difference in engagement rates. However, the tweet did rapidly accelerate Wendy's growth as a digitally engaged brand. In a mere eighteen months following that first 'roast', Wendy's saw a 35% increase in followers, which equates to nearly 350,000 net new followers (Beltis, 2018). It was a monumental moment for Wendy's as they began to redefine personal brand beyond the cute and kind words of a customer service representative.

But what has the payoff for this social media strategy been? Well, for starters, humor makes brands like Wendy's stand out. According to the social media management company Hootsuite, "76 percent of U.S. consumers have purchased a product they've seen in a brand's social media post." (Cooper, 2018) from that brand. If Wendy's can gain recognition from their humorous tweets and catchy captions, then they have a real chance to stand out in a highly saturated industry. Their roasts, both engaging with customers and their competitors, caused their brand perception and recognition to soar. Looking at Google Trends data, which evaluates public interest in certain search terms over time, @Wendys peaked in performance as a Google search term during 2017 – right around the same time that their roasts were becoming the frequent method of communication for the company. The marketing sensation of a Twitter roast was a surprise to many, but overall received positive user feedback, as users tried to engage with Wendy's to be the victim of the next roast session.

The roasts made Wendy's feel like a more approachable brand presence, and were recognized as a scheme of marketing genius In their popular YouTube series "YouTubers React" the Fine Bros received feedback from YouTube influencers about Wendy's brand personality, and overall the influencers were very much in support of the roast: "There has to be a personality behind your brand and I think Wendy's is doing that." one of the interviewed influencers, Lilly Singh, said (Fine Brothers Entertainment, 2017).

Social media changes at such a rapid rate, so it is no surprise that Wendy's social media has also changed over the years. Since their 2017 glory days, it appears that the brand has strayed away from the biting sarcasm, but they continue to reference pop culture and colloquial vernacular to stay relevant for their target. For example, recently Lil Nas X and Billy Ray Cyrus released a collaboration song called "Old Town Road" that has become a nationwide hit.

Naturally, Wendy's had to jump on board with the trend, changing the lyrics for "I got horses in the back" to "I got hamburgers in the bag" along with some clever emoji drawings. The tweet is not an isolated case, but rather a representation of Wendy's continual efforts to stay culturally relevant and appeal to the "meme culture" of the Internet: Wendy's is conveying through their Twitter that "they are a human, witty, and personable brand that stays with the times and isn't afraid to be humorously edgy." (Beltis, 2018). Ultimately this is what the consumers online are searching for, companies that are relatable and able to create more casual conversations through their unique personalities and positioning.

In many ways, consumers interact with brands today with a casualness that mimics a normal conversation between two individuals. Like interacting with our friends, when brands interact with consumers online they are helping to form that consumer's sense of social self; the unique personalities of brands online attract customers who share elements of the brand's persona (Cheregi, 2013). Wendy's clearly understands this, as their brand personality evolves with their customers. When the target grew out of the harsh humor of clapback tweets, Wendy's did not lay down and give up – they merely shifted their content to reflect the change. This is the heart of Wendy's social media. It is not about their humor, it is about their consistent ability to interact with the consumer on a personal level through creating digital conversations.

The days of Twitter beef may not be completely gone, but Wendy's social media has certainly done a bit of growing up. As social media platforms as a whole continue to shift, brands that were highly successful in the past will need to continue to evolve with the platforms. Wendy's will also need to expand their sphere of influence beyond Twitter, as the platform has experienced record-setting decline in monthly users as of the end of 2018 (Wang, 2018). Seeing their evolution and successful transfer from traditional marketing campaigns to social media, it is

unlikely that the conversational wit of Wendy's is going away any time soon. The company has also looked to support their established tone of voice via other unique mediums. Engaging on Twitter with their own followers limits the brand's reach, so they have begun to explore other mediums to engage a demographic outside of their pre-established customer base. In October of 2019, the Wendy's marketing team released their own tabletop role playing game called *Feast of Legends*. The game features a 100-page player's guide to a completely playable game with characters such as Queen Wendy, the "Clapback Queen [...] defender of all things fresh, never frozen" (Kaser, 2019). The game is riddled with clever jabs at Wendy's competition, and reinforces the tone of their other marketing materials. Through their relational marketing, casual tone, and continual attention to the pulse of pop culture, Wendy's as a brand will continue to be an example for other companies in crowded product categories.

Wendy's and GEICO help to emphasize the key roles that humor, along with connecting relationally to consumers can have a direct impact on a brand's sustained success. Both companies leverage humor in their own way to create unique brand voices that are carried across campaigns, and resonate with the brands' respective target audiences.

Humor can be an effective mechanism for achieving virality because it is a positive high arousal emotion. However, the majority of videos that try to be hilarious on the Internet can quickly fall flat: "What one person thinks is funny, another may find simply lame, or even irritating." (Nelson–Field, 2013, p. 37). If targeted very specifically, humorous ads hit a home run, but brands must carefully consider the desires of their target audiences in order to achieve success. GEICO and Wendy's were able to do this, because both campaigns spoke the language of their targets and that is seen in the positive response the campaigns received.

Always

Even when brands know their target audiences well, humor may still not be the best method for achieving virality. There are other high arousal emotions that a company can harness that may have even higher levels of success than humorous content. Telling a story of personal triumph, for example, achieves a higher sharing rate than most other creative approaches in branded video content (Nelson-Field, 2013, p. 38). Always tapped into the storytelling power of personal triumph through their #LikeAGirl campaign.

In June 2014, advertising agency Leo Burnett teamed up with Always to teach a new generation about the brand values Always has tried so hard to establish for decades (D&AD, n.d.). Their campaign, #LikeAGirl, originally premiered digitally as 3 minute documentary-style video on YouTube. This video features adolescent males and females, as well as young females, as they all respond to questions from the interviewer about what it means to fight, run, or throw "like a girl". Quickly, the audience realizes that 'like a girl' is taken as an insult, because the interviewees begin to perform the requested actions, but were clearly not performing at their full potential, despite the interviewer giving no instructions as to how to perform these actions, beyond do it 'like a girl'. However, interviewees that have not yet hit puberty do not make that distinction. When asked what it means to run "like a girl" one interviewee even says "it means to run as fast as you can" but this was from one of the youngest interviewees.

These visuals reinforce the problem Always aims to combat as a brand: low self-esteem in women during the time of puberty. In fact, research done by *The Atlantic* magazine and YPulse – a research institution focused on Gen Z and millennials – found that between the ages of 8 and 14, women's confidence levels drop by 30% (Shipman & Kay & Riley, 2018). Always seeks to change this statistic, and by the end of the video, Always redefines #LikeAGirl as a phrase to empower girls in puberty to be more confident rather less confident. It is important to

note that Always was not the first brand to attempt this type of "empowerment marketing". Dove

was identified by Nina Åkestam of the Stockholm School of Economics as the first to pave the

way for breaking down traditional female advertising stereotypes with their Evolution campaign

in 2006 (Åkestam, 2017, p. 795). Since then, there have been many other campaigns, including

Always #LIkeAGirl, that fight typical female stereotypes with messages of empowerment, and

aspiration.

As of November 2019, the documentary style version of this video has been viewed on

YouTube over 67 million times. It has also won numerous awards, including the 2015 Primetime

Emmy Award for Outstanding Commercial, for the shorter version of the documentary that

premiered during Super Bowl 49 (D & AD, n.d.). Airing during Super Bowl 49, "the most

watched broadcast in U.S. TV history" at the time (Pallotta, 2015) with 114.4 million viewers,

was incredibly strategic by the Always team because of the high quantity of Super Bowl viewers,

but also because of the demographic breakdown of those viewers. The Super Bowl has seen

consistent growth among the female demographic, and in 2015, 53 million women watched the

Super Bowl (Hampton, 2017). Always was able to target these women through their messaging,

but simultaneously their message was spread to male demographics, which may not have been

exposed to the message if it was not placed during such a key sporting event.

According to Google Trends data, the popularity of the campaign title "#LikeAGirl" reached

its peak during the week of Super Bowl XLIX. Additionally, as the popularity of the video

increased, so did the popularity of Always as a brand. There were noticeable spikes in search

activity surrounding the campaign launch in June 2014 as well as around the time of the Super

Bowl commercial airing the following February (Google Trends). While search requests cannot

be the sole indicator of effectiveness of the campaign, they do indicate an increased consumer interest in the brand messaging.

The brand messaging itself is also key to the success of the #LikeAGirl campaign. A hashtag is a quintessential connection of a campaign to the Internet-sphere, and helps facilitate digital conversations about the ad after it was aired during the Super Bowl. Adding the hashtag before the tagline revolutionizes Like A Girl to be more than just a moment; it created a movement people could latch onto: "The hashtag was essential in rallying people to change the meaning of 'like a girl' by showing the world that it can mean amazing things." Judy John Chief Executive Officer/Chief Creative Officer of Leo Burnett Canada explains (D&AD, n.d.). If this ad was merely placed in Super Bowl XLIX without a call to action, the audience could easily have absorbed the information without it infiltrating culture. The hashtag acted as that call to action, or call to engagement, because it encouraged consumers to actually talk about the issues presented in the commercial online .

Since the ad was released, Always has continued to market the #LikeAGirl mantra through several other videos; including an appearance by prominent Olympian Alex Morgan, who encouraged girls to Keep Playing #LikeAGirl in a 2016 prompt. Using an athlete as a spokesperson for the brand aligns with the mission of campaign but is also an effective persuasion method because "customers tend to look up to them [athletes] and their opinions are considered genuine because of their winning personalities." (Malik & Guptha, 2014, p. 137). Allowing young girls to see a strong female athlete encourage them to remain confident is an excellent creative route for Always to reinforce the original messaging of the first #LikeAGirl commercial.

Ultimately, what resonates throughout the #LikeAGirl campaign is the deep familiarity of a story of triumph. Today, "consumers choose to identify themselves with a brand not for the practical promise it makes, but rather for the purpose the brand embodies." (Adi, Crisan & Dinca, 2015, p. 757). The purpose of Always, empowering girls to be more confident even during adolescence, is readily apparent in the campaign, and the consumers recognized this. There is no practical promise about Always products anywhere in this campaign, yet it still achieved viral success and increased visibility of Always as a brand. Once again this shows the power of emotional appeals, and the importance of the long-term game in achieving brand affinity among a target audience.

Conclusion

Whether a brand is using a talking camel, witty 140 character clap-backs, or an empowering message about ordinary people, it ultimately does not matter what creative device is used for a campaign to achieve viral success. Relying on creative devices requires advertisers to be in control of what consumers pay attention to, but ultimately "with a social video campaign, the final sharing is in the hands of the viewers." (Nelson-Field, 2013, p. 44). If the campaign is truly in the hands of the consumers, then brands need to position themselves as desirable for their consumers. That may seem like common sense, but it is so important to the success of a campaign, and ultimately the success of the entire brand. Rather than focus on their own ingenious new creative messaging, brands must focus on what that core message is and who they are delivering it to. Certainly the message can be packaged creatively – we have seen the importance of this across all three case studies – but at the core, "the best ideas are truth brought to light in new fresh ways" not catchy slogans or clever tweets (Sullivan & Boches, 2016, p. 49).

The "what" companies deliver must be truth, and the "who" they must deliver to is a community of engaged consumers. Consumers like to engage with people like them, so when a brand becomes an integral part of the consumer's day to day conversations, that is the true measure of success for a company. The preference to engage with "someone like you" is not a mere attitude, it is a way for brands to build trust in a culture bombarded by messaging. In January 2016, a leading global communications firm, Edelman, released research about the inversion of influence. They found that in today's society, peer voices i.e. the voices of friends and family online, carry significantly more weight than voices of authority in making brand decisions (Ries, 2016). Therefore the only true method for a brand to build trust is infiltrating consumer culture.

So, to return to our original question: When it comes to a company gaining a rapid increase in attention, is it only a matter of chance? Maybe. So far there has yet to be a consistent pattern in creative devices, or even specific emotions, that guarantee a campaign's virality. However, regardless of the creative path, successful campaigns all depends on the consumer getting involved and choosing to share the message provided by the brand to their own communities. The best advertising a company can ever ask for is not a viral success story, but merely being a part of a story shared around the dinner table.

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