

# Viral Videos on YouTube: The Potential of Non-Corporate Videos Gaining Popularity Online.



Project code: JJ1 - Creative production on Web2.0

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Date: 12/08/2011

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## Abstract

This study investigates the processes behind non-corporate videos from YouTube.com going viral. Specifically, the aim of this research is to determine if there are topics or characteristics that are likely to become more popular than others. Additionally, the sharing and finding of videos is examined. Focus groups, content analysis of popular videos and an online survey were used to collect this data. The results of this study found that videos featuring humor and talent are more likely to be popular than other topics. Furthermore, users are particular about the kinds of videos they share with others because of what these videos could communicate to others about the sharer. Most users considered themselves to be passive Youtube users, not in tune enough with popular culture to be the ones to introduce new videos to their social circle.

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## 1. Introduction

Today, user created content (UCC) is a common feature of the Internet. There are three different criteria that comprise UCC. The first is the publication requirement meaning that what is created must be available to everyone over the Internet. On websites such as YouTube.com, the content is available to anyone with an Internet connection. Every video has the potential of being seen by everyone. The second criterion is that there must be an obvious creative effort. While there is a lot of junk on YouTube.com, the creative effort is evident in every video in the making and posting of it. Finally, the content has to be made 'outside of professional routines and practices' (Vickery & Wunsch-Vincent, 2007, p.18). This is an important factor of this particular research. On the whole, the videos posted on YouTube.com are from average people who are using this medium to communicate to the world. There are however celebrities and record labels who have their own YouTube channel to promote their own videos. These would not be considered UCC and therefore are not considered in this research either.

UCC is interconnected with the whole concept of participatory media. This form of media is made up of three characteristics: the many to many aspect by which users are able to broadcast to others, they are social media whose power derives from active participation, and the social networks involved allow for broader coordination of people around the world. This interactivity between users on sites like YouTube is an important feature. Users can leave comments on videos, 'like' them and subscribe to channels. Users can build their own profiles so others know a little bit more about them and their videos. The comments and the liking of videos are important because they help videos gain notoriety and momentum. Eventually the video could go viral. By this we mean videos that become extremely popular through online sharing. Today, a video can become so popular it permeates pop culture and can catapult the subjects into the limelight.

Videos on YouTube can be popular without being a part of popular culture. That inclusion is mainly reserved for those videos that go viral. Popular culture eludes concrete definition, but essentially refers to what some scholars refer to

as mass culture. For the Frankfurt School, “popular culture is the culture produced by the culture industry to secure the stability and continuity of capitalism” (Strinati, 2004, p. XVI). Popular culture can therefore be seen as a form of dominant ideology of the time, a form of mass culture. It refers to books, music, etc. that are available to all in a society. This is the definition that will be used for the purpose of this research. The idea of a popular video on the other hand, simply refers to its appeal to many people. A video must be popular for it to go viral, yet popularity does not guarantee that level of success.

Video sharing sites are an important part of Internet usage today. Websites such as YouTube.com and Vimeo.com encourage users to express themselves in any way and post it online to share with the world. Because there are so many users posting on the site, there are a lot of pointless and uninteresting videos that never obtain any views. As a result, these videos go by unnoticed by the other users. There are however, the select few videos that become so popular, they become a part of pop culture. They soar from obscurity and become the talk of the Internet and offline. Every year there are lists put out of the top videos on YouTube.com that must be watched. These videos are about all sorts of things from surprised kittens to the meaning of double rainbows. This thesis aims to investigate the qualities of these videos, what is it that makes them so popular? How do they spread?

As of 2008 there were over 80 million videos, by now there must be millions and millions more (Burgess, 2008). It was difficult to find a concrete number for 2011. The potential in this amount of videos is huge. Videos are extremely important today, As TEDtalk curator Chris Anderson explains in his article for Wired (2010), videos are a new and improved way of spreading information and triggering innovation. Instead of telling someone about an idea, of trying to describe it in uncertain terms, you can just SHOW it to him or her from half way across the world. He said that it is through this way of information sharing that innovation is taking place at a much faster pace than ever before. The example he gives is that of dancing, and how a dance crew in California can post a video and a different crew in Japan can watch it, build on it and post a

response mere days later. These dancers can contribute to the evolution of their craft around the world. Videos on sharing sites like YouTube have the potential to be seen by anyone around the world, this can lead to extreme exposure, or being lost in the mass amounts of videos available.

Internet users have a great say in determining popular culture today. They can take a person from obscurity and thrust them into the limelight through the ability to share information across the globe instantaneously. Websites like YouTube.com have helped in the discovery of recording artists Justin Bieber and Esmée Denters, as well as in the creation of the dance crew LXD. The exposure that the Internet affords its users can lead to great things. On the whole it leads to temporary fame for the maker or the subject of the video as a country or even several become obsessed with their videos. On the whole, previous research on viral videos has primarily looked at HOW videos go viral, what processes must happen for this kind of popularity to be achieved. This is usually discussed in terms of marketing, in order to better reach the widest audience possible with the platforms available to them. This research on the other hand, seeks to examine non-corporate videos and their rise to fame. Without the financial resources that companies have to advertise their videos, how and why do these videos go viral?

There are three main research questions for this study. First of all, how do videos go viral? Secondly, what kinds of criteria, in relation to the content of the video, are necessary for a video to go viral? and finally, is there any sort of 'magic formula' for videos to go viral? To answer these questions, three different methods were used. Focus groups were the first step to determine what characteristics participants look for in videos, as well as their general thoughts about the process of going viral. Next was the content analysis of a select sample of popular videos on YouTube, to see what kind of qualities they all shared. Lastly was an online survey to provide further data about user's preferences in terms of watching, finding and sharing videos.

## **2. Literature review**

For a video to go viral the subject matter must appeal to the masses, as well as be easy to find. Little research has been done on non-corporate viral videos. From what I have found the focus of research on videos tends to be on how this phenomenon can be harnessed for marketing. This study on the other hand, endeavors to contribute to research about non-corporate videos. The aim of the research is to investigate how the content of the video relates to its potential to go viral. Therefore, understanding the concept of 'going viral' is important. Knowing how these videos gain such momentum is intriguing since these videos are non-corporate and do not have the kind of financial backing that corporate videos have. Some of the literature that was found examines how users stumble upon these videos in the first place, and how the platform can influence a video's popularity. The combination of these different aspects should give us a clear background on user's need and want to share; a crucial part of the viral process, as well as the whole process of going viral in general.

The relationships between media producers, media consumers and media texts have changed drastically in recent years. In today's participatory culture lines are blurred and roles are shared (Jenkins, 2006). YouTube is a perfect example of how the roles of the media consumer and producer are changing. Henry Jenkins mentions three trends that are shaping how participatory culture is taking shape in his essay on collective intelligence. The concept of collective intelligence refers to a sort of 'shared' intelligence that stems from the collaboration of many individuals. This can be seen on sites like Wikipedia and YouTube, where different people's entries combine to form a wealth of information. According to Jenkins, collective intelligence first involves new tools and technologies. These allow consumers to store, interpret, appropriate and re-circulate different media content. On YouTube.com users can make accounts that lets them store countless video files as well as comment on the content of others. Second, there is an encouragement to use DIY media production. Most of the videos on YouTube are taken from the user's own cameras and cell phones. The users make their own entertainment and do not solely rely on corporate

media production. They take matters into their own hands. Lastly, he claims that there are economic trends that favor horizontally integrated media conglomerates, thereby encouraging “the flow of images, ideas, and narratives across media channels and demand more active modes of spectatorship” (Jenkins, ¶4, 2006). Users of YouTube are encouraged to actively participate in the community by creating their own content. Much of the video content deals with spectators re-appropriating media content and interpreting it in their own way. This re-appropriation and interpretation will be discussed further on with the research of Jean Burgess.

While many researchers examine what happens with user created content (UCC) on YouTube and the Internet in general, Daugherty, Eastin & Bright (2008) investigated the consumer motivations for creating UCC. An understanding of these motivations is important, as are the consumer attitudes towards UCC; this could lead to a predictive model of audience behavior. They mention that the appeal of the possibility of UCC is that it gives the users/consumers a voice in a world saturated with information and advertising. They found that the social function of UCC leads consumers to seek out activities that are seen as positive and favorable by important others. This would suggest that keeping on top of trends and being knowledgeable about what is happening online is important to Internet users. Passing on videos would be a way of showing your social network that you are up to date with pop culture. This would be a way of displaying your interests to others as well as showcasing how in-tune you are to what is happening culturally at the time.

The relationship between user motivation to create UCC, YouTube itself and viewers is an example of what is referred to as the Social Shaping of Technology (SST). Livingstone & Lievrouw (2006) explain SST as “a mutual shaping process in which technological development and social practices are co-determining” (p. 4). YouTube offers Internet users a way to share all sorts of videos with others. These users embraced the site as a platform in which they could express themselves in a unique way. Users became creative with their content, using video and audio to communicate whatever they like to the world.

As there is a platform like YouTube that encourages such communicative behavior, it follows that passive users of the site, those who do not contribute content, would be attracted to videos that are more personal in nature. This is what SST boils down to. YouTube shaped our behavior by encouraging creativity and entertainment for the masses, and we in turn have turned it into a platform for our own self-expression, an outlet for our identity.

Increasing broadband access as well as the implementation of easy-to-use software tools has propelled the participation in the creation, distribution, using, of digital content. Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent (2007) examined the different 'drivers' for UCC and named four different categories: technological, social, economic and institutional and legal drivers. The social drivers are of most interest in this case because they shed light on who YouTube users most likely are. They mention that UCC sees a shift towards younger age groups who are willing to engage online and are far less hesitant to reveal personal information online. Furthermore there is an overall desire to create and express oneself while being interactive which is not readily available on traditional media platforms. We see this aspect on YouTube with many videos showing the user doing various activities or simply talking about their life like Kevin Jumba, a YouTube celebrity who vlogs about his life and his father. He became so popular he was able to use this support to his advantage and became a contestant on the Amazing Race with his father. The opportunity that YouTube allows for its users to be very personal and connect with others through video is what makes it such a special website. The slogan is indeed 'Broadcast Yourself', encouraging users to express and share their identity online. Identity can be seen as involving one's self image, self-esteem and individuality (Leary & Tangney, 2003). The videos that users create or feel compelled to watch show the world a part of their selves, or their identity. These non-corporate videos usually show snippets of real life that others identify with, which is perhaps their appeal.

It is a different form of User Created Content that is seen on YouTube as opposed to other sites. According to Burgess and Green (2009), it is the social

network function of the site that sets it apart from the average UCC website. They suggest that the motivation behind participation in the YouTube community by uploading videos is “as much to do with social network formation or collective play as it does with self-promotion” (p. 29). YouTube videos are first and foremost entertainment for the masses. It is a site where people upload videos of their singing, funny situations, cute animals, etc. The purpose of the videos is different than on other sites such as Vimeo.com where it is more about your creative artwork. Burgess and Green highlight the idea that YouTube can be seen as having a specific form of creativity that is unique to the site, a sort of ‘vernacular creativity’. They claim that for this site, “the creation and sharing of videos functions culturally as a means of social networking as opposed to as a mode of cultural ‘production’” (2009, p. 26). The creation of these videos are perhaps more about enhancing the user’s online identity rather than creating a cultural artifact. The passing along of these videos would be connected to this idea of identity. The videos we choose to share, just as the videos we choose to make, would be a way of showing part of our identity to others.

For a video to go viral, in essence it must be easy to find, easy to spread and appeal to a wide range of people. The platforms in which these videos are posted are the first step in the process of viral videos and as such should be understood. Gillespie (2010) discusses in his article the different definitions of ‘platform’ and what its purpose actually is. A platform can be seen as an online space where information is visible and accessible to any given user. He claims that a website such as YouTube is one of many “search engines, blogging tools and interactive online spaces that are now the primary keepers of the cultural discussion as it moves to the internet” (p. 348). These videos have the potential of becoming cultural artifacts as they transcend the Internet sphere and permeate our daily lives and become a part of popular culture. The exposure a video gets can obviously aid its popularity. In websites like YouTube, there are built in filters to help users sift through all the content they have. On the homepage we see different categories like ‘Most Watched’, ‘Watching Now’, and ‘Recommendations’. These different categories can be crucial for these non-

corporate videos to attract the attention of users. This would be the first step for a video to go viral; it must first gain some popularity amongst YouTube users themselves. Once the video gains momentum on the site itself, that is when it starts to be featured on other sites and shared more often. These other sites act as more formal platforms to showcase very specific videos, namely those that have managed to captivate society enough to transcend the YouTube realm into traditional media.

As we have mentioned, a key element for a video to go viral is Internet users and their ways of sharing videos. The easier and faster a video can be spread, the more likely it can go viral. This places a lot of power in the hands of the everyday Internet user, so it is necessary to understand their role. Van Dijk (2009) theorizes agency in user created content and the user's role online. What we have today is a participatory culture, one where there are increasing demands for space for ordinary citizens to use media technologies to express themselves to the world. Users now have direct power to shape media content. He mentions that there are actually relatively few people who create content on sites such as YouTube, and therefore there are different levels of participation. An American survey showed that only 13% of online users of UCC sites are considered 'active creators' while 33% are seen as 'passive spectators'. These passive spectators can be seen as the driving force for a video's popularity, their viewing is what leads to YouTube fame. However, as Van Dijk points out "YouTube fame only counts as fame after it is picked up by traditional mass media - television, movies, newspapers and so on" (2009, p. 53). These videos can become so popular as to go beyond the Internet and make its way to other forms of media, and eventually to life offline. These passive users, passive because they rarely contribute content themselves, are contributors to pop culture. This study aims to investigate what kind of videos these users are attracted to and why.

As viral videos permeate other areas of our lives, the videos get their 15 minutes of fame. Van Dijk touched upon what fame means in the realm of YouTube and Burgess and Green (2009) expand on this idea. They discuss the

concept of fame in YouTube and how it differs from fame in traditional media. There are different measures of how successful a video is on YouTube. They claim that celebrity on the site is not necessarily measured by the amount of views it has, but rather by the video's ability to transcend the site into old media. YouTube users such as Esmée Denters and Justin Bieber were able to take their YouTube popularity and translate into record contracts; this would be a signifier of their celebrity. What we can gather from this is that going viral is not necessarily the greatest achievement that can be had on YouTube. The producers of the video might get temporary fame but it will not be lasting until they get something concrete out of it. Transcending the realm of YouTube and being mentioned on a third party site is not enough to suggest real fame. Indeed, what Burgess and Green concluded is that celebrity within YouTube is a law unto itself.

YouTube videos can be about almost any topic, but many revolve around talent and humor. They are predominantly user created, and as Jean Burgess (2008) discusses, the most popular ones tend to be performance-based. In her article she discussed viral videos in relation to marketing and the effect that they can have on the public. She primarily examines the way the video 'Chocolate Rain' was disseminated, how it gained popularity and what exactly happened once it went viral. The video spawned a number of imitators or others who used parts of it to create something new like remixes or parodies. These imitations or references further cement a video's status as being viral and a part of popular culture. A key factor that she mentions is that the video went far beyond the intentions of the original producer. "Successful 'viral' videos have textual hooks or key signifiers, which cannot be identified in advance (even, or especially, by their authors) but only after the fact" (2008, p. 5). She suggests that ultimately you cannot predict the cultural impact any given video will have. They seem to take on a life of their own. The aim of this thesis is to understand how videos like 'Chocolate Rain' become so popular in terms of their content.

The potential of the videos on YouTube is great. A site like this is important today as "an open innovation network benefits from harnessing the

creative energies of the whole population, not just the inputs of isolated expert elites” (Hartley, 2009, p. 132). This is the potential of YouTube. Chris Anderson (2010) referred to this as Crowd Accelerated Innovation in an issue of *Wired*. Users feed off of each other’s work and create their own, furthering the idea. This innovation and creativity does not always lead to great discoveries. Many of these videos are just for entertainment. As Burgess showed in her article on the ‘Chocolate Rain’ video, popular videos tend to spawn imitations and spinoffs. One such example was a webisode of Chad Vader, a popular YouTube show that follows the life of Darth Vader’s less successful brother, where the character sings the song. The contribution of other users does not have to be groundbreaking or huge, but they have the opportunity to reinterpret and react to material in any way they want. The general idea is simply to be funny and creative, this is what YouTube users find so appealing. As Hartley said, “*purposeless entertainment* has nurtured demand for creative self-expression and communication among the young” (2009, p. 130). YouTube videos are ultimately meant to entertain, meaning to divert or amuse. In the process of making these videos, whether for others or themselves, users reveal parts of their identity. The role of youth and young adults is important to understand, as they are the ones who usually create the content on YouTube. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2007) found that 76% of young adults (ages 18 to 29) watch videos online. They are therefore instrumental in the process of videos going viral as they are more involved with social networking sites and other social uses of the Internet.

Videos are not the only thing that can go viral online, the whole phenomenon could be said to have started with email, chain mail to be exact. Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Raman and Perry (2004) took a similar look at chain emails and user’s motivation to pass them along. They look at these motivations in the context of advertising so companies can better capitalize on them. They look at the social aspects of the forwarding of emails, and how receivers feel about those who send them forwards. Phelps et al. also touched upon the impact of these emails on daily life and whether they were dealt with offline. This relates

to other research on videos going viral and the impact they have on social life. Generally, when videos become so popular, they become a topic that is discussed amongst people, and sometimes even make the news. They have become a part of our daily lives and entertainment. Interestingly Phelps et al. found that most chain letters dealt with jokes or nudity. While nudity is not allowed on YouTube, a lot of popular videos are funny. Perhaps this is one of the main criteria to pass along videos and email, this is what we aim to find out in this study.

Many theorists have researched what it is that makes a video or email worth passing on. Michael Wesch (2007) discusses in his article how he accidentally made a viral video. He posted a quick sketching of what Web 2.0 actually entails because he was having difficulty explaining such a dynamic concept on paper. He posted it on YouTube to be able to send it to a friend more easily and next thing he knew people from all over the world were watching his video and expanding on his work. He uses this example to illustrate changes that are happening in the mediascape; as mentioned by Chris Anderson (2010), times are changing. Collaborations are now easier than ever as is information sharing in general. This information sharing can lead to what Anderson calls Crowd Accelerated Innovation, and can be seen to be more and more common. By Crowd Accelerated Innovation he means the notion that ideas posted on sites like YouTube can spawn new ideas. This is because people have easy access to them and can therefore build upon the ideas of others. Whether the videos are about new forms of dancing or the best way to explain the concept of Web 2.0, video sharing sites allow people from around the world to expand on each other's ideas, thereby accelerating the process of innovation. Video is a great way to share and inform. Not all videos that go viral are necessarily about frivolous things such as double rainbows and children coming home from the dentist. They can also be informative. Regardless of the content of the videos, they are still posted by average users. It is interesting to see what about these videos makes them stand out to others, leading to their popularity.

Above we discussed Gillespie and how the idea of the 'platform' must be understood. Part of Kevin Wallsten's (2008) thesis was to examine where voters found information online as he discussed viral videos in relation to the Obama election. He seeks to examine how viral videos permeate the dominant political discourse, looking at how viewers found one of the most popular videos, will.i.am's 'Yes We Can' music video. His conclusion is that blog discussions were very important, meaning third party promotion is important. This would suggest that the platforms or other websites that choose to mention the video is important. A video does not become popular and famous simply by being posted on YouTube. The whole idea of viral videos is based on user's wanting to 'pay it forward' so to speak. It makes sense that the more websites talk about a certain video, the more exposure it gets and more chances that it will go viral. However what is particularly interesting about his findings is that he found that blogs were the most important source, not proper established websites like Yahoo! or MTV.com. This would suggest that in most aspects of user created content, others involved in participatory media are trusted more than corporations.

As mentioned, a lot of videos are uploaded on a daily basis. YouTube has over 80 million videos as of 2008, by now there must be millions more. Not all videos on YouTube have redeeming qualities, a lot of them are just junk that people feel the need to share. Sornette and Crane (2008) discuss the process through which users sift through what they call 'noise' (i.e. junk) on YouTube to find relevant videos. They worked with the concept that looking at popular items is not enough; we must take into consideration the small, niche interests since they have the potential to outweigh the market share of the few extremely popular videos. They sought to find a way to identify emerging trends on YouTube as well as finding content with real value. They found that viral videos rely on word of mouth for their epidemic like spread through social networks, while quality videos experience sudden bursts of activity due to their content. Junk videos on the other hand obtain activity simply by chance. This shows that the 'quality' of a video is not necessarily a requirement for videos to go viral.

This research aims to contribute to the rather limited literature concerning non-corporate videos and their rise to popularity online. The research described above, served as a background and as a starting point for understanding the phenomenon of 'going viral' as it currently stands. The goal of this research is to decipher what qualities these videos have, that contribute to their popularity, as well as investigate the sharing process.

### **3. Methodology**

Three different methods were used to collect data: focus groups, an online survey and the content analysis of a select list of YouTube videos. Approaching the research from several different angles is referred to as triangulation. This process should afford a more comprehensive and multifaceted view of what is important in a video to make it go viral. The focus was on non-corporate videos, as any videos that were meant for advertising would automatically have a better chance at higher exposure because of the push of the company behind them. Similarly any video uploaded by a celebrity from their own account was not counted, as they would automatically attract their fan base. Non-corporate videos would then be those who are made by average people, they fall under the category of user created content online as defined by the OECD (2007). The focus of this study is on the content of these videos and what makes them worth passing on for the user. After all a video only goes viral because of the users' perceived need to share with each other.

#### **3.1 Research Questions**

This study aims to analyze the process through which videos go viral on the Internet. The focus is on the content of the videos themselves and how this aids them in becoming so popular. This study also aims to investigate through what platforms users find videos besides YouTube and why users choose to share videos. We set out to examine if and how the sharing of videos is related to the content of the video. These aims have been translated into the following research questions and sub questions.

- How do videos go viral?
  - o We will answer this by looking at the different platforms through which users find videos. Videos go viral because of the pace through which they are shared, so finding out where users mainly hear about videos is important. Besides YouTube, where else do they hear about these videos? How do they primarily share them? For instance, is it through social media or email?

- What kinds of criteria, for the content of the video, are required for the videos to go viral?
  - o This question aims to find out what it is about the videos that make them worth sharing in terms of what the videos are about. Is humor what is important? Or the fact that they are short videos? Is talent crucial? What the video is about must be an important factor in users sharing videos; promotion and exposure of the video would not be enough on its own. We will answer this question by asking participants what they look for in videos, and why they like certain ones over others. This would determine if there are certain topics that do better than others.
- Is there a 'magic formula' for videos to go viral?
  - o While I am not expecting to find an actual formula for videos to go viral, it would be interesting to see if there is a particular combination that works. Perhaps humor is much more likely to appeal to people than talent or certain platforms are more popular than others.

My assumption as the researcher is that I will find that most of the videos that go viral are either funny or a demonstration of talent. I familiarized myself with the topic under investigation for several months before research began. Even though the focus is on non-corporate videos, once a video gains a certain amount of popularity, users will predominantly find videos through bigger websites like MTV or Yahoo! and social media like Facebook.com, not from YouTube itself. This is because sites like MTV, Yahoo! and blogs value user created content and frequently include popular videos on their home pages, even non-corporate ones.

### **3.2. Focus Groups**

Focus groups were the first step of the research. The rest of the research was based upon the results obtained from those sessions. This research aims to understand what it is that people look for in the videos they watch and why they choose to share some with others. As a result, qualitative research such as focus groups was deemed to be appropriate. It was also chosen because the

discussion format could yield some interesting insights into the phenomenon at hand, as well as help shape the study. Focus groups were chosen over individual interviews because the topic of this research is very broad in the sense that anyone with any experience with YouTube videos could be a potential participant. In this way, the researcher was able to collect more data in less time (Bloor & Frankland, 2001). Also, my own experience with YouTube has suggested that larger groups of people make discussing videos easier, because there are other participants present to share experiences with and remember videos.

Three focus groups were carried out with 6 participants in each. The sessions lasted no more than an hour each. The participants were all university students at University College Maastricht, in the South of the Netherlands. The students were all between the ages of 18 and 26. The main criterion was that they have some experience with YouTube videos.

The participants and the researcher sat around a large square table with the tape recorder in the middle. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of their participation. The researcher debriefed the participants of the purpose of the focus groups and the research in general. However they were not explicitly told the research questions. Each focus group started with small talk to establish rapport and to make sure the participants were not self-conscious about the tape recorder.

The first question the participants were asked was very broad in order to get the discussion started. They were asked what kinds of videos they usually watched on YouTube and why. When the topic was exhausted, the researcher asked them about whether or not they share videos. This part of the discussion also touched upon the why and how of video sharing. Overall the main themes that were discussed in these sessions were types of videos preferred, the perceived impact of YouTube on popular culture and their preferred ways of sharing videos and to what avail.

### **3.3 Content Analysis**

The second step in the research was content analysis. This method was chosen because it is a useful way of analyzing audiovisual texts such as YouTube videos. Content analysis enables the researcher to reduce different phenomena, in this case video characteristics, into particular categories to better interpret their meaning (Harwood & Garry, 2003). Based on the information garnered from the focus groups and the theoretical background, the coding form for the content analysis was created. The main themes that were addressed in the focus groups in relation to what people look for in a video were translated into criteria to look out for. The researcher coded for the length of the video, quality of graphics, the major and minor topics, the main and minor actors, total views and whether the video featured animation or real people.

It is hard to keep track of what video goes viral, as well as when and where they do so. There was no comprehensive list of viral videos of the past year at the time of coding, so the researcher decided to examine the most popular videos of the most subscribed channels on YouTube. The videos that were coded were obtained from a website, [youtubestars.blogspot.com](http://youtubestars.blogspot.com), that keeps track of the Top 100 channels on YouTube. The researcher sorted through the list for all the non-corporate channels by looking at the channel's page and affiliations. Once the channels were selected, the videos with the most views were chosen for each channel. Of these 100 channels, only 67 were non corporate. As a result, only 67 videos were coded.

This method was used to check popular videos for the criteria that the focus group sample suggested was important to them in choosing a video to watch. The aim is to see if the results from the focus groups and the content analysis of these videos are similar. It was assumed that the videos that were coded would reflect the criteria that the participants discussed in the focus groups. Content analysis is also a helpful starting point for quantitative research, which was done later on. To ensure reliability and validity, a clear-cut coding form with properly defined criteria was created. In this case, a second coder was also

used to re-code the videos to make sure of the validity and reliability of the first coding and the subsequent results.

### **3.4. Survey**

The third step in the research was the creation of a survey. The content of the survey was also based upon the results of the focus groups as well as the results from the content analysis. The different themes and characteristics that were brought up in the focus groups and were observed in the coded videos were translated into closed questions. It was a step further into quantitative research. The survey was made with SurveyGizmo.com and was distributed online via email and various social networking sites such as Facebook.com and Twitter. It was conducted online because the sample required would need a degree of Internet experience and this form of distribution would be an easy way to ensure this. Additionally the data collection and subsequent analysis can be carried out much easier with sites like SurveyGizmo.com. It is also far less time consuming (Wright, 2005).

There are however some disadvantages to take into account. Because the link to the survey is posted online, it is difficult to control who takes part in the survey. Furthermore, sending the survey out via sites like Facebook.com means that the sample runs the risk of being self-selected. The first is not of great concern to this study, but to overcome the second disadvantage, the link to the survey was posted in more public forums as well and respondents were encouraged to spread the word. This is otherwise known as snowball sampling. It is a non-random form of sampling where participants are asked to recruit further participants (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004). While usually used for hard to reach populations, this method was used for this research because it was a simpler way to reach potential participants.

The sample consists of 159 respondents in universities across the Netherlands. Just as for the focus groups, the sample did not necessarily need to meet any particular criteria besides have a familiarity with YouTube videos. University students were chosen as a target group because they would be more easily accessible for the researcher. Additionally, there are higher chances of

university students having a familiarity with YouTube, because they are usually more involved with the Internet and new media compared to older generations. The survey consisted of 49 questions, separated into 7 different sections. There are no screening questions due to the wide range of potential respondents.

The first section of the survey is about the kind of YouTube user the participants consider themselves to be. The participants are asked about how much time they spend in one session on the website as well as their degree of activity on the website in terms of simply watching, sometimes sharing or going as far as uploading their own content. These reflect some of the issues that were raised during the focus groups. This section also covers the different themes of the videos they prefer to watch such as those that feature talent, humor or expertise. These different types of videos were derived from the focus group results. The participant could rate how often they watch each type of video on a five-point Likert scale made up of never (1), not often (2), sometimes (3), frequently (4) and always (5). This is to determine which types are the most popular, and how active people perceive themselves to be in the YouTube community. These questions will help answer the second research question.

The second section deals with the different criteria that might influence whether the participant watches a video or not. They were asked about length, quality of graphics, animation, and perceived popularity of the video in relation to the weight that they hold for the participant. Each characteristic was given the same five-point Likert scale where: not at all (1), hardly (2), sometimes (3), almost always (4) and always (5). This set of questions will help answer the research question concerning the criteria that must be met for a video to be popular, as they deal with conditions for the users to watch videos.

Part of the process of videos going viral is the video being found and seen by droves of people. The third section of the survey dealt with the ways in which the participants went about finding the videos they watch as well how active they usually are in the process. The survey touches upon different ways of finding videos such as word of mouth, both online and off, and through social networking sites. This section also deals with the tools that are built into the YouTube

website to help users find more videos such as the Trends, Recommended and Most Popular sections. The same five-point Likert scale was used as in the section above.

The fourth section also aids in answering the research question about how videos go viral, but focuses on the sharing aspect of the process. The questions touch upon how often the user shares videos with others as well as what sharing methods are preferred. The survey then goes back to the different types of videos and which ones the user usually feels more inclined to share with others. In this way we can compare what kinds of videos the participants watch versus the ones they feel inclined to share, and the potential discrepancies in between. The fifth section of the survey consists of four questions. They deal with the social implications of sharing and looking at whether or not this would have an effect. The participants were asked about any reactions they might get from the videos they share. The participants were also asked if they find the videos that they share say something about them. This could have an influence on what type of videos they are more inclined to share. The same two five-point Likert scales were used as before for both sections.

The sixth section of the survey is about how active the participants are in the searching of new material to watch and share. Additionally, it touches upon the importance the participants place on YouTube as a manifestation of popular culture and how in tune they are with it. Different scales were introduced, giving the respondents the options of yes (1), somewhat (2) and no (3) for their relationship with popular culture and whether they feel the need to watch videos that have recently gone viral. This set of questions will assist in answering the processes behind videos going viral as it examines the importance attributed to sharing videos in a broader context. The final section deals with demographic questions such as gender, level of education and age.

These were the methods used for the data collection in this study. They were carried out between March and April of 2011. The following chapter deals with the analysis of this data.

## 4. Results

### **4.1. Analysis of Focus Groups**

A total of 18 students from Maastricht University took part in one of three the focus groups. The focus groups yielded some interesting results that fell in line with the researcher's assumptions. The participants discussed why they watch YouTube videos, what kind of videos they like and why, as well as how they find the videos that they watch and why they share them with others. What all the participants agreed upon is that, as one of them stated, "if it is not interesting to watch, you would not be watching it on YouTube." To them, YouTube has the reputation of containing captivating videos, they visit the website for a reason.

#### **4.1.1 Characteristics for YouTube Videos**

When the participants were asked why exactly they watched YouTube videos, they unanimously announced "for entertainment". They use it to watch music videos, movie trailers, animal videos, skits, etc. While the participants seemed open to watching almost anything on the site, they did mention that there were some factors to take into consideration. They all had criteria that could influence whether or not they would watch a video.

The participants clearly agreed with each other that unless they were watching a lecture or something that was meant to be educational in some way, they rarely had tolerance for a video that was over three and a half minutes. As one participant mentioned, what they liked about YouTube is that "you click, you watch it, it's over in a minute. It's great." There is so much to watch on the site, that the videos need to be short, otherwise it is viewed as too time consuming. Even if the video is funny and entertaining, if it goes on for too long, users lose interest and move on to a different video.

The quality of the video is also an issue that the participants were concerned with. Some participants were more particular about the videos being high quality, expressing an appreciation for the high definition option YouTube

now provides. As one participant said “YouTube videos should have at least some of the same standards as other media in terms of quality, unless there is an actual reason for the poor quality.” For example videos of riots or earthquakes were expected to be of poorer quality, which add to the overall impact of the video. The quality does not have to be crystal clear, in fact if it is a bit choppy or it is clear that the video was taken on a mobile phone, it adds to the authenticity to the event. The participants agreed that it gave a sense of reality and spontaneity to the video. Poorer quality is particularly acceptable when it comes to filming major events and disasters because it adds to the immediacy of what happened. For videos that are displays of talent, whether it is dancing, singing, or skits of some kind, the quality is expected to be much better. If it is not then it is deemed as irritating and not worth watching because you are unable to appreciate what the video is about.

Another characteristic that the participants look for in their videos is that subject matter is enlightening in some way. They discussed how some videos provide different perspectives on life issues. Videos can feature different people and how they go about life. One of the participants commented that some videos allow you to compare yourself to other people, see how others react and deal with situations. This is why they think video bloggers, or vloggers, are so popular on YouTube. Popular vloggers like KevJumba talk about their daily lives in a fun and relatable way. A significant amount of the participants expressed a preference for videos that depicted real life in some way, even if it was a skit or an act, as opposed to animation. This was unless the animation was done really well, and had to have a purpose or be hilarious. One participant mentioned that animated videos such as ‘Charlie the Unicorn’ are great, but then you would not watch an animated version of ‘Charlie Bit My Finger’. Animation must then be used in what they deem to be an appropriate context. No one could specify what that context might be, just that animation either works or it does not.

The major themes that the participants agreed they look for in their videos is that they be funny, enlightening, a showcase of talent, educational or inspirational in some way. To many of the participants, these videos are akin to

something they would watch on television, albeit on a much smaller scale. As a result there is an expectation that the videos will be amusing, diverting or informative in some way. It is not all just passive entertainment although the majority agreed that this was a big part of it. They want to see something special, something worthwhile as well.

Many of them felt that if people took the trouble to record something and post it online then it should be at the very least interesting to watch in some way. As one participant pointed out “the interesting thing about YouTube is that anyone can be a part of it, but it must be said that not everyone does it well.” There is a lot of junk on YouTube that is not worth watching. Many videos do not appeal to the masses. They are either poorly made or just do not have that special something that other videos have. The presence of such videos online has an influence on the way users watch, share and find videos on YouTube. As Sornette and Crane (2008) proposed, users must search through the ‘noise’ online to find videos they deem to be relevant.

#### **4.1.2. Sharing and Finding**

The participants discussed the various ways in which they come into contact with YouTube videos. While some found videos on various websites who seem to dedicate themselves to gathering and posting the most popular videos of the week, this was not the main source. All of the participants agreed that the primary way in which they are told about videos or choose to share themselves via social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter. They claim that it is a simple and easy way to reach their social circle in general as well as specific people. They all agreed that for the most part they share these videos on their status because it is the easiest and fastest way to share the video with people. Furthermore, sharing in this way makes it easier to engage in discussions with many people at once about the video. The comment fields allow everyone in your social network to react to the video that you share. It is the easiest way to gage the reaction of your social circle to the videos that you are introducing to them.

The participants seemed to attach a meaning to the videos they shared on their own profiles. Videos that were posted to specific friends were shared

because of a particular interest. Videos that were posted on their own page say more about themselves. One participant claimed that she shared songs that were on her mind, or videos that really spoke to her that she wanted others to know about. She said she shares many inspirational videos that agree with her personal views. For instance she likes to post a video of a valedictorian speech from a high school graduation because she found it so uplifting.

“There’s this video of a random high school graduation speech that I found one day. I just really like it! It makes me so happy and hopeful that I just want to share it with people.”

The participant said she shares videos that usually have a positive message, and that is what encourages her to share them with others.

Yet another participant said she never posted very popular videos on her profile. Instead she posted less well-known videos. As she put it:

“Whenever I come across a funny, popular video, I don’t share it because I feel like everyone must have seen it. I don’t want to show that I’m behind on the joke or the trend. So I post other kinds of videos instead.”

She said she posts all sorts of videos, such as humorous ones or even more inspirational ones. The one thing they tend to have in common is that they are more obscure. She does not share videos that have gone viral, out of concern that she caught on too late. Her feelings towards posting viral videos show that there is some sort of social standing that is associated with the videos that you know of. They become so ingrained in pop culture today that knowing of the videos at the right time is important. Some of the other participants agreed with her in some respects, but they pointed out that there were some exceptions. For instance some videos become ‘classics’ and therefore deserve to be brought back every now and then to remind others how great it was.

The participants all indicated that part of the attraction of these videos is that they can then talk about them with friends. For example, catchphrases and dance moves from the videos become a joke, a reference that everybody understands. These videos become topics of conversation out in the real world, not just online. Therefore there is a certain expectation to keep up and be on point with trends, or at least maintain the illusion.

They all agreed that they do not just share anything with others. As one participant stated “to share something, it has to be more than just funny. It has to be exceptional.” Essentially, in order to be worthy of sharing, a video must be more than just funny or a showcase of someone’s talent. The video has to be special. The sharer must recognize in it features that will be very much appreciated by their social circle. The participants mentioned that the sharing of a video with friends or their wider social circle is to get some sort of response or reaction from them. For instance, if the video were shared on Facebook.com, The ideal is that friends would click the ‘like’ button on the video first. Ultimately though, it is a way to stimulate discussion, and get some acknowledgment for introducing it to others. Many participants agreed that they watch many videos that they do not feel the need to share although they like them. This suggests that while they are open to watching many videos, they are much more selective when it comes to sharing. This is both because they prefer sharing unique videos as well as not wanting to bombard their social circle with videos to watch.

Another prominent way of finding out about videos is word of mouth. Sharing does not always take place online. Many participants agreed that often, when they gather with their friends in a social setting, they end up sharing videos with each other. It becomes a bit of a contest to see who can come up with the best video to share with the group. Everyone tries to outdo each other, suggesting videos their friends might like the most. Watching videos then becomes a social activity, which everyone can partake in. This is predominantly how videos can become a part of popular culture as social groups appropriate catchphrases and actions into their interactions with each other and make it their own.

Most participants agreed that they do not necessarily go searching for funny or exciting videos they just stumble upon them. This can be through posts on social networking sites or their daily surfing of the Internet. They do not go on a mission to find a video to share with their friends whenever they go online. They all said it happens more organically than that. They either find a video they want to share or they do not. It is hardly ever the intent fueling their time spent online. When they do turn to the YouTube search engine, they are looking for very particular videos. The videos they actively seek out tend to be of videos they already know of, music videos, and interestingly instructional videos, where they are taught how to do something like how to fix a bike. Some admitted that although this is how it starts out they end up watching many other videos as well. This is due to the 'Related Videos' section. As one participant pointed out 'the 'Related Videos' is perhaps more important than the 'Most Watched' list.' This is because these videos are of course related to topics that interest the user, while the Most Watched do not necessarily have anything to do with the user's personal taste.

Many participants, the more frequent users of YouTube, expressed an appreciation for YouTube channels. They explained that once they realized what kind of videos they really enjoyed and the users who uploaded them, they started following them. A YouTube channel is essentially a home page for a user's account. On this page they show their name, the videos they've uploaded and information about themselves. Once the participants found a channel they enjoyed, they check it regularly for updates, forgoing searching YouTube for videos from different users. One participant explained that "you stick to one thing or channel more than in the early days of YouTube because now you know what you want to watch, the novelty has worn off." The participants agreed that when they first started using YouTube a few years ago, they were far less selective in what they watched because the concept was so new and exciting. Now though, YouTube users visit the site with a purpose, not to roam around the site, looking for something to watch.

## **4.2. Content Analysis**

A total of 67 non-corporate videos from the most subscribed channels on YouTube were coded for this study. The data collected was put into the SPSS program for analysis. These are the results of the analysis. On the whole many of the results were in line with what the researcher expected in terms of popular themes and other characteristics. Relations between some variables, such as main topic/graphics and main topic/main actor, were investigated to give a clearer picture of characteristics these videos have in common. However, results from these statistical analyses were disappointing as most correlations were not statistically significant.

An interesting part of the analysis of the videos was finding out which characteristics these popular videos had and shared. Out of all the videos coded, they seemed to split evenly between two categories in terms of quality of graphics. The videos were either of good or professional quality; none were any lower than that ( $M= 3.51$ ,  $SD= .504$ ). This suggests that quality of graphics is quite important for viewers. Additionally, 91% of the videos featured real people instead of animation or cartoons. In terms of the length of the videos, the range was quite varied. To make the data easier to handle, the lengths were recoded into three different categories: short (0.01 to 2.56 minutes), medium (2.57 to 5.45 minutes), and long (5.46 to 17.28). Most of the videos were rather evenly divided between short and medium length with 40.3% and 47.8% respectively. This fell in line with the researcher's expectations of shorter videos being more appealing. However, the fact that a video that is 17.28 minutes long made the list was quite surprising. It shows that if the topic is interesting enough, then length may be disregarded as a factor.

The videos that were coded dealt with a variety of topics. As we can see in Table 1 below, the main topic the results ranged from talent to humor to technology and games. However the most popular was by far humor with 61.2% of videos featuring it as their main topic. The next most popular topic was human-interest videos with 16.4%. Human-interest refers to issues such as lifestyles, trends and trivia. Surprisingly videos that feature talent were not so popular, with

only 7.5% of the videos. Next, the researcher looked at the main actors in the videos. The overwhelming majority featured regular people as their main actor. A total of 85.1% of the videos dealt with regular people. The rest dealt with animals, celebrities, amateurs, and animated people and animals in equal amounts.

	Frequency	Percent
Talent	5	7.5
Humor	41	61.2
Expertise	5	7.5
Entertainment	2	3
Human Interest	11	16.4
Technology/Games	3	4.5
Total	67	100

Table 1: Main topics in the videos.

As we can see in the table above, the results fall in line with previous research done on chain mail (Phelps et al., 2004), where they found that humorous chain mails were more likely to be passed on than others. The popularity of funny videos suggests that humor is a favorite when people choose what to watch.

The researcher looked for correlations between length and quality of graphics, amount of views and people featured, main topics and people featured, main topics and main actors, main topics and graphics, as well as main topics and views. Surprisingly, contrary to what the researcher was expecting, there were no significant results to report. This could be due to the rather small sample that was used.

One statistically significant correlation that was found was between the length of the video and the total amount of views. We found that  $r = -.244$  ( $p < 0.05$ ). While this is not a strong correlation, it is significant nonetheless. The value indicates that to an extent, the shorter the video, the more views it is likely to have. This falls in line with the researcher's expectations. The length of the video is clearly an important characteristic of the video for users, as was also indicated by the participants in the focus groups.

Although the correlations between different variables were not as strong or significant as the researcher expected them to be, the results of the content analysis were still helpful in furthering out understanding of viral videos. Content analysis was chosen to help answer the research question concerning what characteristics would increase a video's chance of going viral. As we have seen so far, humor, good graphics, length and the featuring of real people have been the most popular characteristics. All can be said to influence the amount of viewership to different degrees.

### **4.3. Survey Analysis**

The survey was made on SurveyGizmo.com, and was spread online. There were a total of 193 participants who started the survey, but only 159 actually completed the whole survey. Only their results will be taken into account for the purpose of this study. The purpose of the survey was to further determine the participants' preferences regarding the videos they watch and share. In general, the results found matched the expectations of the researcher. First we will analyze the topics and characteristics of the videos. Following this will be the analysis of the sharing of videos as well as how the participants go about finding videos to watch. Lastly, we will examine the role of YouTube in popular culture as well as the user's perceived role in their social circle and relationship with popular culture.

#### **4.3.1. Video Topics**

The topic section of the survey dealt with the main types of videos available such as talent based, humor and expertise. Equal amounts of participants said they frequently watch videos featuring talent and humor with 45.9% and 45.3% respectively. Videos featuring expertise and celebrities were not nearly as popular with only 12.6% and 9.4% of participants saying they frequently watch that kind of video. Videos featuring news or other reporting brought up the rear with only 7.5% of participants claiming to frequently watch such videos.

	Frequency	Percentage
Talent	73	45.9
Humor	72	45.3
Expertise	20	12.6
News/Reporting	12	7.5
Celebrities	15	9.4

Table2: Frequently watched topics.

As we can see in the table above, talent and humor were by far the most preferred topics the participants chose to watch. It would follow that these are also the types of videos that the participants feel more inclined to share with others.

Indeed, 20.8% of the participants claimed they almost always share videos that feature talent with their social network. As we can see in the table below, there is a clear preference for sharing videos that feature humor and talent. There was a slightly higher amount, 28.9%, of participants who almost always shared funny videos. These numbers were significantly higher than those for the sharing of videos featuring expertise (5%), reporting or news (3.1%) and celebrities (4.4%).

	Frequency	Percentage
Talent	33	20.8
Humor	46	28.9
Expertise	8	5
News/Reporting	5	3.1
Celebrities	7	4.4

Table3: Table of 'almost always' shared topics.

So although 45% of participants almost always choose to watch videos that feature humor or talent, they do not necessarily feel the need to share all of the videos.

When these results were correlated with the popularity of topics, we found some interesting, statistically significant results; the following set of medium to strong positive correlations. Watching talent videos was correlated with sharing this kind of video ( $r = .462$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Similarly, for videos that feature humor, it was found that  $r = .613$  ( $p < 0.01$ ). The watching and sharing of videos featuring expertise yielded  $r = .397$  ( $p < 0.01$ ). For videos relating to news we found  $r = .528$  ( $p < 0.01$ ). Finally, videos featuring celebrities gave a value of  $r = .570$  ( $p < 0.01$ ). These results indicate that the kinds of videos that the participants watch are indeed the kind of videos that they share as well. However, they are clearly selective about which videos they share in each category, not sharing absolutely everything that they watch.

#### **4.3.2. Influencing Factors**

The participants were asked about the different factors that influence what videos they watch. On the whole, the participants did not seem to feel strongly either way, usually choosing towards the middle of the scale.

The majority of the respondents claimed that the popularity of a video was only 'Sometimes' (39%) an influence on the videos they watch. Whether the video featured real people did not seem to be an important factor for participants with 'Not at all' (34.6%) and 'Hardly' (34%) being the most popular answers. Similarly, whether a video was animated did not seem to have much impact on viewers, where 'Not at all' had the majority with 35.2% and 'Hardly' and 'Sometimes' close behind with 27.7% and 28.3% respectively. When asked about the quality of the graphics, the majority (45.9%) said that this only sometimes influences them and only 30.2% that it almost always does. The length of the video was not deemed to be that important either. The majority (46.5%) said it only influences them sometimes, while 24.5% said length is hardly an influencing factor.

What we can gather from this data is that none of these factors are heavy influencers for viewership. The quality of graphics and the length of the videos were correlated with the most popular types of videos since they were the characteristics that had the highest percentage of sometimes being an influence. The idea being that these factors would have the most influence on the more popular types of video. There were no statistically significant results. It follows that whether these characteristics have a deciding influence on watching, varies from one video to the next.

#### 4.3.2. Sharing Videos

There are many ways for Internet users to share videos with others. The survey looked at the different ways that were preferred by the participants. The most popular way of sharing was by far through social networking sites (77.4%) like Facebook and Twitter. As we can see in the table below, the other ways of sharing, particularly email (3.8%), are not nearly as frequently used. Word of mouth offline (6.3%) and online (12.6%) did not fare that much better.

	Frequency	Percent
Social Networking sites	123	77.4
Email	6	3.8
Word of mouth offline	10	6.3
Word of mouth online	20	12.6

Table4: Ways of sharing videos.

Besides the ease that social networking sites afford the users, the popularity of its use as a sharing tool could also be because of how it encourages reactions. Furthermore, the videos are shared with a much wider audience than through the other methods. Livingstone (2004) discusses how the technological interface of the Internet allows for different forms of communication: one-to-one as well as one-to-many. Sharing videos on social networking sites is usually a case of one-to-many communication, where one person is able to reach most, if not all, of their social network in one go.

Part of the survey also dealt with reasons why the participants might feel inclined to share videos with others through whichever way. The majority of participants (47.8%) agreed that they almost always share videos because they feel their friends will enjoy them. Interestingly, the participants did not seem to think that they shared videos because the videos say something about them to others. Only 37.1% of participants said that this was sometimes the case, the rest of the participants were predominantly split between 'Hardly' (24.5%) and 'Never' (23.3%).

While not many participants felt that the videos that they shared said something about them, we found that it depends on the kind of video shared. This factor, feeling videos that they share make statements about their selves, was correlated with the sharing of different kinds of videos. Interestingly we found only statistically significant results for videos that featured news ( $r = .211$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), talent ( $r = .280$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and celebrities ( $r = .167$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This could be because these kinds of videos say much more about the user's likes and dislikes than videos that feature humor or expertise. A user's taste in news, talent and celebrities can help others determine how in tune they are with what is currently going on in the world. Additionally, there is a statistically significant relationship ( $r = .389$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) between thinking a video you share says something about you and whether you share videos at all.

A total of 88.1% of participants said that they do get reactions to the videos they share with their friends, although this did not seem to be a driving factor in their inclination to share. The majority (37.1%) said that reactions 'somewhat' influence whether they share, and 30.8% said that it was not really a factor. There does not seem to be anything concrete that influences whether a video is shared or not. It seems to be dependent on the kind of video.

We can gather from this data that sharing videos can happen in many ways and it is mainly because users think their friends will enjoy them. While there can be effects to their sharing of videos, such as reactions, the participants do not go looking for videos. When asked if they actively search for material to

share, 81.8% said that they do not. On the whole, the participants did not seem very convinced of their own role in introducing videos to their social network.

	Frequency	Percent
Never	15	9.4
Not often	65	40.9
Sometimes	61	38.4
Frequently	18	11.3

Table5: How often do they introduce videos to their social network.

As we can see in the table above, the majority of the participants (40.9%) said that they are 'not often' the ones who bring new videos to the group. These results were followed closely by the participants who felt that they were 'sometimes' (38.4%) the ones who introduce videos to their social circle.

#### 4.3.3. Finding Videos

There are many ways for users to find videos to watch. As such, it would follow that Internet users need to take initiative in their search for finding something to watch. Indeed, when asked if they actively looked for new material to watch, it was fairly evenly divided between yes (46.5%) and no (53.5%).

The participants were asked about their preferred methods of finding videos in general and specific to search tools available on the YouTube site. When asked if they found videos on sites other than social networking ones and YouTube, 47.2% of participants answered that they only 'Sometimes' find them this way. Similarly, in terms of word of mouth both online and offline, around half of participants (55.3% and 44.7% respectively) answered that this was 'Sometimes' the case. For these three ways of finding videos, 'Sometimes' was the most common answer by a significant amount. For social networking sites on the other hand, 'Sometimes' was followed very closely by 'Almost always' with 48.4% and 39.6% of participants respectively.

	Frequency	Percent
Not at all	1	0.6
Hardly	14	8.8
Sometimes	77	48.4
Almost always	63	39.6
Always	4	2.5

Table6: Finding videos through social networking sites.

Following from the results above where social networking sites were the preferred place to share videos, these sites were also the most popular ways of finding videos to watch outside of YouTube itself.

When asked how often they used YouTube.com to find their videos, the answers were almost evenly split between ‘Sometimes’ (38.4%) and ‘Almost always’ (34.6%). In the table below we can see the distribution of how frequently participants use YouTube to find videos. As we can see, it is a platform that is generally used.

	Frequency	Percent
Not at all	7	4.4
Hardly	27	17
Sometimes	61	38.4
Almost always	55	34.6
Always	9	5.7

Table7: How often users find videos on YouTube

This could be because Youtube has different categories that they have on their homepage in order to help and direct users to different videos. These categories are Recommended, Trends, Featured, and Most Popular. The last category is Related Videos, which appears when the user is already watching a video. The results for the Recommended videos were fairly evenly split three ways between ‘Not at all’ (26.4%), ‘Hardly’ (27.7%) and ‘Sometimes’ (27%). The Trends

category seemed to be the least popular of them all with 71.7% of participants claiming they never look at it. The Most Popular category is not considered that important either with 54.7% saying they do not look at it at all.

The Related Videos category is by far the most popular amongst the participants. The results were split almost evenly between ‘Sometimes’ (34.6%) and ‘Almost Always’ (36.5%). These results would suggest that YouTube users prefer the categories that are more relevant to them such as Recommended and Related Videos, as these are catered to the user’s YouTube activity. The videos that are featured in the other sections do not necessarily have anything to do with the user’s personal taste.

#### 4.3.4. YouTube, Users and Popular Culture.

It was assumed by the researcher that participants would be inclined to watch popular videos. This is because these are the videos that tend to make the rounds in social circles, both on and offline. However, as mentioned, when asked if the popularity of the video influenced the videos they watched, it did not seem to be an important factor. Indeed, as we can see in the table below, less than a third of the participants considered popularity to be an influence.

	Frequency	Percent
Not at all	33	20.8
Hardly	30	18.9
Sometimes	62	39
Almost always	29	18.2
Always	5	3.1

Table8: The video’s popularity influence on viewership

The survey also dealt with the perceived importance and role of YouTube in popular culture as well as theirs as a user. Most participants agreed that YouTube is important as a manifestation of popular culture. Over half of the participants (52.8%) said that the site is ‘quite’ important, while most of the rest

was equally divided between 'somewhat' (22.6%) and 'extremely important' (22%).

When asked if they considered themselves in tune with popular culture, 51.6% of participants considered themselves to be 'somewhat' in tune, while 34% said yes, they are. Interestingly, although the participants agreed that YouTube is at the very least quite connected to popular culture, and that they are relatively in tune with popular culture, 28.9% of participants said that they do not make it a priority to watch videos that have recently gone viral. A total of 46.5% said they sometimes make a point of it, and only 24.5% said that yes, they try to watch viral videos when they come out.

The participants were asked what kind of YouTube user they considered themselves to be. The vast majority (72.3%) said that they were mostly passive users, only watching videos that others uploaded. As we can see in the table below, the participants are not very active users.

	Frequency	Percent
Mostly passive- watching videos others uploaded	115	72.3
A little bit active- sharing videos, commenting, liking videos	30	18.9
Active- regularly sharing videos, commenting, liking videos	13	8.2
Very active- uploading your own content as well as sharing, commenting and liking videos.	1	0.6

Table9: Type of YouTube user.

When these results were correlated with the importance of YouTube as a manifestation of popular culture, we found that  $r = .185$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . It is a weak relationship but it indicates that the more active a user is, the more important they see YouTube in terms of popular culture. This could be because those who are more active in their dealings with the website are more aware of what

YouTube has to offer, as well as be more observant about its impact on their lives both on and offline.

When looking at the relationship between the importance of YouTube and the kinds of videos the users watch, it was found to be statistically significant in relation to news videos. The relationship is a weaker one at  $r = 0.166$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . These results could be due to the fact that with camera phones and easy Internet access, there has been a rise in citizen journalism. This refers to the idea of citizens being active in the collecting, reporting and analyzing news and other information (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Websites like YouTube are ideal for posting videos of what is happening in the world. In this respect, it is understandable that participants would think that YouTube is important in relation to popular culture. There were no other statistically significant relationships with the other kinds of videos.

#### ***4.4. Combining the Results.***

##### **4.4.1. Main Topics and Influence of Video Characteristics.**

The participants in the focus groups claimed that the main type of video that they like to watch on YouTube is humorous ones. This was supported by the findings in both the survey and the content analysis. Funny videos as well as videos that feature talent seemed to be the most popular overall. This was supported by the survey findings where around half of the participants said they frequently watch these kinds of videos. During the focus groups, the participants were much more positive and enthusiastic about going on YouTube to learn something, whether that be from videos featuring expertise or news related. This was not very reflected in the content analysis or the survey results. Only 8 out of 67 videos that were coded were related to tutorials or news, and less than 13% of participants watched these sorts of video.

As we learned from the focus groups, there are certain characteristics that will affect whether a video is watched besides the topic. These are namely length, quality of graphics, the main actors and the topic. The participants claimed that the shorter the video the better, saying they could hardly tolerate a

video over three and a half minutes. The videos that were coded however, indicated that even a video as long as 17.28 minutes was able to be one of the most popular. It must be said though that the majority of the videos were less than 5.45 minutes, which is more in line with what the participants were saying. Furthermore, in the survey the majority of the participants said the length of the video was only sometimes an influence.

The qualities of the graphics as well as whether the video was animated or not, were also factors that influences whether a video was watched. On the whole they preferred high quality for the graphics, which was enforced by the videos that were coded. All of them were of good or professional quality. As the participants mentioned, they expect some degree of quality from the videos they watch, somewhat akin to what they would see on television. The results from the survey suggest that the quality of the graphics is not a determining factor for viewership. This reinforces the idea that was brought up in the focus groups, namely that poor quality could be excused depending on the nature of the video. Additionally, the participants, favoring depictions of real life much more, did not seem to like animation unless it had a purpose. Hardly any of the videos that were coded were animated, emphasizing the idea that animation is not very popular. Surprisingly, in the survey, 35.2% of participants claimed that animation had no influence at all. This could simply indicate that animation is accepted on the whole, but for an animated video to be popular or go viral, then it has to be exceptional to make the cut.

What we can conclude from these different characteristics that were deemed to have an influence during the focus groups, is that ultimately they do not have that great of an effect on viewership. As shown by the variety of videos that were coded, it could be said that the extent to which the characteristics have an influence may depend on each individual video.

#### **4.4.2 Finding and Sharing Videos.**

According to the participants in the focus groups, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are a big source for finding videos to watch. The constant update of a user's newsfeed makes it easy to come across videos without putting

in very much effort. Indeed most survey participants agreed that they predominantly share via these kinds of sites. The use of social networking sites for finding and sharing videos is popular because it is a simpler way to reach the majority of their social network in one go. These sites have newsfeeds that continually update themselves with activity from people in your network. Therefore, without any effort on the user's part, they can see the videos that their friends have shared with others. This could be why 42.1% of survey participants said they either almost always or always find the videos they watch on this kind of website.

Another advantage of sharing through social networking sites is that it is easy for people in the user's social network to engage in discussions and react to the video that you shared. For the participants in the focus groups the reactions were an important consequence of sharing videos. However in the survey results, we saw that reactions from friends were not necessarily a driving factor for sharing. While 88.1% said they do in fact get reactions, this is not why they share videos. In the focus group they mentioned that certain phrases and moves from videos become a part of their interactions with their close friends. Perhaps reactions to videos mean more coming from their close circle of friends than their broader social network. This would mean that reactions in general are not an influencing factor in sharing, but particular people's reactions are more important to the sharer.

The focus groups also felt like the videos they shared said something about them to their friends, emphasizing likes and dislikes, sense of humor, etc. In the survey results it was found that only some videos were seen as saying something about the sharer, namely videos about news, celebrities and talent. These kinds of videos are clearer demarcations of how up to date a person is with what is currently going on in the world. The focus group participants also felt that the videos they shared showed their friends how in tune they are with popular culture and what is currently popular online. We found a positive, medium strength relationship between thinking videos say something about you and sharing videos at all. This would indicate that people are more conscious of

sharing these types of videos with others because of the message they would be sharing about themselves at the same time.

Overall, what we can conclude when it comes to finding videos to share, hardly any users set out to across the Internet with the express purpose to find something to share with others, it happens much more organically than that. When it comes to finding videos just for themselves however, there is a little more effort involved. Most participants in both the survey and the focus groups claimed that they did not actively seek out new videos to share and to an extent to watch. As mentioned in the focus group discussions, when on YouTube, they usually have an idea in mind of what video they want to watch. However, after this initial viewing, there is no telling what they might end up watching. It depends on what the site itself offers.

When using the YouTube site itself to watch and find videos, participants in both the survey and the focus groups claimed that the Related Videos section is the most important of all the sections suggesting videos to watch. This is because the videos that are suggested are related to what the user is currently watching, and therefore more likely to be in line with their interests. The other categories are based on what is happening on the YouTube site as a whole.

Hanging out with friends seemed to be a popular way to both find and share videos. The participants in the focus groups said that often, their social gatherings ended up on YouTube as they and their friends showed each other the best videos they could think of. However, only 6.3% of survey participants said that they share videos offline. Yet 44.7% of participants claimed that word of mouth offline was sometimes how they found out about videos. Finding videos seems to happen in many different ways, but social networking sites are favored since it requires the least amount of effort.

#### **4.4.3. YouTube, Users and Popular Culture**

Videos go viral because many people watch them and people feel the need to share them with others. However it was interesting to find that some participants had some misgivings about sharing videos they thought to be already popular. In the focus groups, it was discussed how sharing popular videos could be

'dangerous' in the sense that it could mark you as someone who is not up to date, if the video has already made the rounds amongst your friends. While the participants deemed that some videos were 'classics' and deserved being brought back every now and then, some were apprehensive that they would be wasting their friends' time with a video they have already seen. Additionally, in the survey results it was found that 46.5% of participants only sometimes make it a priority of watching videos that have recently gone viral.

Participants in both the focus groups and the survey agreed that YouTube is significant as a manifestation of popular culture. They were not quite so sure of their own relationship with popular culture. In the survey it was found that 51.6% of participants considered themselves to be 'somewhat' in tune. Similarly, in the focus groups, the participants seemed reluctant to claim that they were very much in touch with popular culture. Furthermore, most of the participants (72.3%) claimed to be passive users, only watching videos that others have uploaded. It could be due to the participant's passive relationship with YouTube, they do not feel as if they could be on top of popular culture, but have seen enough to recognize YouTube's role in it.

There seems to be an interesting relationship between users, popular videos and their perceived relationship with popular culture. Users do not seem to be overly active in their looking for popular videos to watch or share. Yet it is agreed by most that YouTube does have a significant relationship or connotation with popular culture. As mentioned in the focus groups, it is somewhat expected of people to be up to date with the most popular videos of the time, yet some are apprehensive to share these same videos with others. It almost seems to be as if it is every user's responsibility to keep up with the goings-on of viral videos so they can discuss it with others. Furthermore, it is unclear if anyone is really in charge of introducing new videos to the social circle. The results indicated generally, participants were not confident of their own role as most claimed that they only sometimes, or not often, introduced videos to their friends.

## 5. Conclusion

This study aimed to contribute to the research done on the impact of user created content, the phenomenon of viral videos, as well as the role of YouTube in popular culture. The main research questions for this study were: How do videos go viral? What kinds of criteria, for the content of the video, are required for the videos to go viral? and finally, is there a 'magic formula' for videos to go viral? After analyzing the data, these are my conclusions.

It was assumed at the beginning of this research that there would be certain kinds of videos more likely to be popular than others. It was also assumed that there would be some sort of video characteristics that would aid a video in gaining a fan base. However, the results showed that while humor and talent were more appreciated than other topics, in essence each video is a separate entity. Particularly in terms of the video's qualities like length or graphics, the characteristics that might help make one video popular, would not work for another. Ultimately each video is dealt with and assessed on its own, not necessarily as part of a bigger category.

In terms of finding and sharing, processes that are key for a video to go viral, it was found that Internet users mainly turn to social network sites. While users watch all sorts of videos, they only feel the need to share some and these sites are the easiest way. Usually they share those that are deemed special in some way, those that are bound to make an impact on their social circle. Finding videos to watch in general is a much easier task. When using YouTube specifically, Recommended Videos are seen as the most useful since they pertain to what the user is already watching.

An interesting issue that was first brought up in the focus groups is the idea of YouTube as a manifestation of popular culture since viral videos have the potential to transcend the online sphere into everyday life. Since they were mainly passive users, the participants did not see themselves as being in tune with popular culture, but they recognized YouTube as an important part of it. As most users see themselves as passive users, it is up to a few key people in each of the social circles to bring in new videos and share them with others.

The literature that was examined proved to be a suitable background for the research. Just as Phelps et al. (2004) found for chain mail, we found that humor was one of the most popular types of video to pass along. Moreover, as Gillespie (2010) suggested, users are particular about the platforms they use to both find and share videos. These are just some examples of how the literature helped situate the findings of this research.

Focus groups, a survey and content analysis were used to collect data for this research. These methods proved to be appropriate to examine the phenomenon of non-corporate viral videos from various perspectives. The focus groups provided rich information on which to base the rest of the research. Furthermore, both the content analysis and the survey yielded interesting data to complete the picture painted by the focus groups. Approaching the research from several different methods is called triangulation, and in this case proved to be very useful. It allowed for a much more cohesive analysis of non-corporate videos and their potential for popularity.

### ***5.1. Limitations and Further Research***

For this study, I was able to successfully carry out three different focus groups, content analysis of 67 videos and a survey that was distributed to almost 200 participants. The research was a success and yielded interesting results. However, as previously mentioned, focus groups do have their limitations such as group dynamics interfering with the discussion (Bloor & Frankland, 2001). In this case, while there were some dominant personalities in the sessions, it was not deemed to be of great importance. The subject at hand was not very personal or hard hitting, so the reluctance of some participants to speak up is not a great loss. On the whole, everyone participated at least a little. To compensate for this and to obtain more data, the researcher chose two other methods to collect data as well.

Additionally, the sample for the content analysis was rather small. Ideally the sample would have been larger, but at the time of coding the list on [youtubestars.blogspot.com](http://youtubestars.blogspot.com) only comprised of 100 channels. This research could be expanded upon with the new list that covers the top 200 channels.

For further research it would be interesting to find a way to gather the videos that have gone viral over the past few years to see what they have in common with each other. We were not able to do that for this research, since there was no comprehensive list of videos to use as a sample. Furthermore, the aspect of cross-media was barely touched upon in this study. This refers to the idea that true celebrity status is only granted to those videos that are able to transcend the world of YouTube into other media. This would be a very interesting aspect to study in more detail.

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