

# Lifecycle of Viral YouTube Videos

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## **ABSTRACT**

YouTube was founded in 2005 as a video-sharing website. Today, it's a powerhouse social media platform where users can upload, view, comment, and share content. For many, it's the first site visited when looking for songs, music videos, tv shows, or just general entertainment. Along with the sharing potential provided by social media like Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and more, YouTube videos have the potential to spread like wildfire.

A term that has been coined to describe such videos is "viral videos." This comes from the scientific definition of viral, which involves the contagious nature of the spread of a virus. Virality on the Internet is not a new concept. Back when email was the hottest new technology, chain e-mails spreading hoaxes and scams were widely shared by emailing back and forth. As the Internet aged, however, new forms of virality have evolved.

This thesis looks at a series of 20 viral videos as case studies and analyzes their growth over time via the Lifecycle Theory. By analyzing viral videos in this manner, it aids in a deeper understanding of the human consciousness's affinity for content, the sociology of online sharing, and the context of today's media culture. This thesis proposes that the phenomenon of virality supports the claim of Internet as heterotopia.

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## Part 1: Introduction

On February 10th, 2011, a video was uploaded to the video sharing site YouTube of a young girl singing about her everyday life and dancing with her friends. Completely unbeknownst to this 13-year-old girl, by March of 2011 she would become a household name. This video was entitled “Friday - Rebecca Black”. After being posted on the popular blog The Daily What, the video shot to popularity. Most viewers commented on the video’s absurd lyrics, monotone singing, and over-production. After being shared in high volume, the video had earned 3 million views by March 15th, 2011 and 10 million views by March 17th, 2012 (Rebecca Black - Friday, 2012). This Internet phenomenon of the rapid rise of a piece of content to popularity is known as virality.

“Web video has made it so that any of us, or any of the creative things that we do, can become completely famous and a part of our world’s culture” (Allocca, 2011). In his 2011 TEDtalk, Allocca explains the role of the viral video in online media culture. Because of their intense rise to popularity and depth of reach, not only can people upload videos for the whole world to see, but others can express themselves creatively through blogging about, commenting on, and making parodies of these videos. Because of this intense participation of audience members, people today now are able to feel a sense of “ownership in [their] own pop culture” (Allocca, 2011), which is something that media in the past lacked.

How has this phenomenon emerged and what are the dynamics behind a viral video? Is there certain type of content that is sure to reach virality? Or is the sharing aspect more important? Can viral videos be analyzed more deeply by their lifecycles? This thesis aims to answer these questions to clear up the mystery surrounding viral

videos to aid in a deeper understanding of the human consciousness's affinity for content, the sociology of the online network, and the context of today's media culture. Using a set of viral video case studies, this thesis proposes that the phenomenon of virality supports the claim of Internet as heterotopia. Additionally, there is a potential application in the advertising discipline to more profoundly understand a potential niche market.

## **Part 2: Preliminary Research**

### **2.1 Concept of Virality**

According to the Oxford Dictionaries Online, the definition of the term virality is “the tendency of an image, video, or piece of information to be circulated rapidly and widely from one Internet user to another.” This term has emerged in recent times to describe this Internet phenomenon - even the definition uses modern terms. However, the concept of virality is not a new one. The term comes from the scientific definition of viral, which involves the contagious nature of the spread of a virus. Certain content on the Internet tends to spread just as infectiously as a viral diseases do, so this term has arisen in recent years to describe this phenomenon.

However, the concept of virality is not a new one. Communication itself has changed rapidly throughout mankind as new technologies have been discovered. From primitive cave drawings to passed down folk tales to newspaper articles, humans have always found ways to share interesting content with each other.

Chain letters are a phenomenon that took advantage of the growing facilitation of communication. The earliest chain letter is hard to date, but by the 1900s they were a common sight (VanArsdale, 2007). Basically, they were letters sent through the post that asked the receiver to pass the letter along to a few more people. Through this spread, the number of people reading the letter would begin to increase exponentially. People would take advantage of this accelerated spread by using chain letters to collect money, raise awareness for specific causes, encourage prayer, etc.

With the invention of the Internet came huge opportunities for rapid communication. In the early years of the Internet's life, chain e-mails evolved as one of the first forms of viral content as a virtual form of the chain letters that had already existed (Mikkelson, 2009). Chain e-mails functioned similarly to their chain letter counterparts - they consisted of some sort of message that would get the reader to send the e-mail along to as many people as possible in their e-mail address book. But since the Internet is infinitely faster than the postal service and much easier to use, chain e-mails could be spread incredibly quickly.

Mikkelson (2009) broke contemporary chain e-mails into five main categories: money-generating, luck-generating, altruistic, something for nothing, and humor, and we can think of these categories in the context of communication in general as well. Regardless of category, however, most chain e-mails followed the same format. They began with some sort of story, statistic, quiz, poem, quote, or something else to draw in the reader. Afterwards, there would be an ask for the user to forward the email to either a specified number of people or as many people as possible in a certain number of days. Finally, there is the potential threat or danger for not following instructions, oftentimes the threat of death or bad luck was used.

By breaking down chain e-mails into this structure, it becomes clear why they became so viral. First of all, they contained attention grabbers in the form of poems, stories, or quotes. Next, the act of forwarding to friends is a very low barrier to entry or challenge for the reader. It's incredibly easy to just press a button and type a few names to forward an email. Of course, the threat at the end also serves to persuade people to share. As VanArsdale mentions in his research, the nature of the spread of chain letters

and e-mails can be attributed to population dynamics and distribution networks; the exponential growth from the few original recipients causes the content to spread in a viral nature. These chain letters are a prime example of the concept of virality - before the modern term even existed.

As the Internet has evolved and new applications and websites have been developed, chain e-mails have waned in popularity. Visual and audio content is now much more attractive because of the interactivity they offer. Some of the most shared and most talked about pieces of content are now viral videos stemming from the popular site YouTube.

## 2.2 Content of Viral Videos

YouTube was founded in 2005 as a public video-sharing website, available for anyone to use (About YouTube, 2013). Today, it's a powerhouse social media platform where users can upload, view, comment, and share content. For many, it's the first site visited when looking for songs, music videos, tutorials, television shows, or just general entertainment. Coupled with the sharing potential provided by social media applications like Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and more, YouTube videos have the potential to spread like wildfire. The platform YouTube created is an essential part of the evolution of the viral video and of the term virality.

Once this phenomenon started to appear, many individuals began to question what it takes to create a viral video themselves. There has been much research gone into the study of the content of viral videos to find common themes: cute animals, irony, humor, pain, etc. Individuals could take these themes and create their own viral videos.

Big corporations could utilize these tactics for marketing purposes and create viral video campaigns. West's (2011) research, in particular, uses a series of case studies to examine the most popular elements of viral videos. The findings from this research is summarized below.

<i>Percentage of Videos Containing Each Factor</i>	<i>Significant Factor</i>
90%	element of irony
75%	a short title length (three words or less)
60%	a short run-time (three minutes or less)
60%	musical quality
50%	element of surprise
35%	youth
30%	talent
30%	element of laughter
20%	ethnic minority presence

West mentions that many of these qualifications, like irony or talent, are subjective to the viewer's preferences. That particular fact is what makes it so difficult to try and predict if a video is going to go viral or not. Even if there were a video that contained all the elements above, there's little to no way to tell whether or not the Internet is going to propagate it to viral status or not. The subjectivity of the collective audience very much affects whether or not a video will rise to popularity, since viral videos, by definition, are launched to fame mostly through social shares as opposed to through organic search.

## 2.3 Social Spread of Viral Videos

Research conducted by a team of engineers at Google in 2010 further examines this definition of viral videos by separating social and non-social views. The research analyzes what exactly sets viral videos apart from non-viral videos that still have many views. In their categorization, they define the “socialness” of videos and how that relates to the virality of a video.

Broxton and co. analyzed the views and referrals of 1.5 million YouTube videos. Referrals track the method through which a viewer found the video and can be broken down into two categories: social and non-social. Social referrals include embedded videos on blog posts, links shared on Facebook, links sent via instant message, and other methods that involve peer-to-peer interaction. Non-social referrals include typing through a search engine or clicking internally within YouTube. By breaking down the referrals into these two categories, Broxton and co. quantitatively categorized each video into a specific level of socialness. For example, if 90% of a video’s referrals came from social sources, then it would be considered highly social.

Through their research, they found that the level of socialness of videos varies significantly among different categories. Figure 1 compares two histograms of videos from two different categories: “Music” and “Pets & Animals”. On the x axis is the percentage of social views, as defined by the referrals explained above, and on the y axis is the fraction of videos examined that fall in those buckets. In the “Music” category, only 0.05 of the videos fall into the 90-100% social category. In the “Pets & Animals” category, however, more than a fourth of the videos fall in the 90-100% social category. Viral videos often contain animals, so this is not surprising. While music videos can be

very popular and boast millions of views, the argument is that they would not necessarily be classified as viral because of their general lack of socialness (Broxton, 2010). There are, however, exceptions - some music videos can be considered viral, like *Gangnam Style* or Rebecca Black's *Friday*.

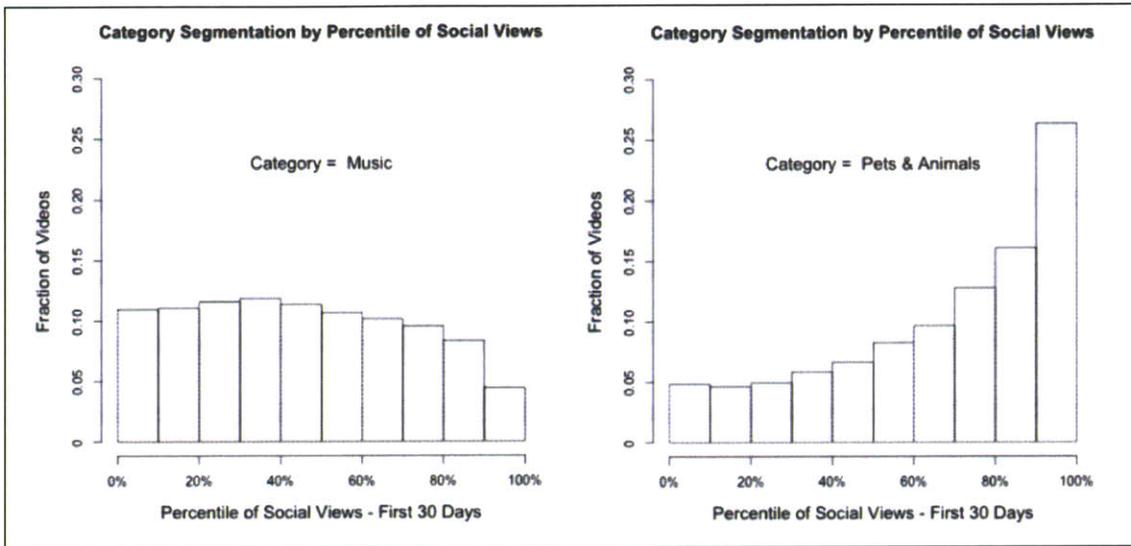


Figure 1: Socialness of Music vs. Pets & Animals

Another interesting insight from this research is the difference in level of socialness of videos over time. They compared two specific cases – a “ViralVideo” versus a “MusicVideo”. As you can see in Figure 2, for the MusicVideo, most of its referrals are social at the very beginning. But, afterwards, the views are mainly non-social and level off to a fairly steady place. In comparison, the ViralVideo relies heavily on social referrals all throughout its existence, peaking and falling at various intervals due to the randomness of social sharing. This strong tie to social referrals is what

separates viral videos from other kinds of videos and is what creates such a strong impact in the minds of the viewers.

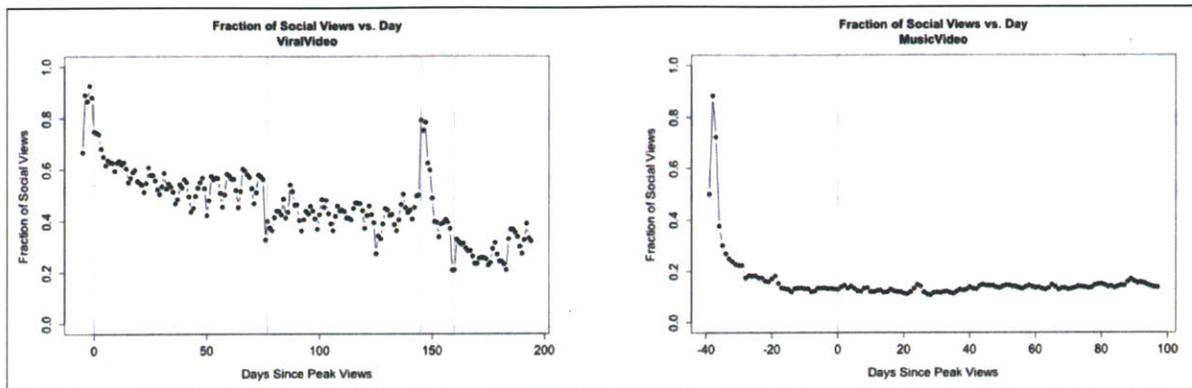


Figure 2: ViralVideo vs. MusicVideo

## 2.4 Lifecycle Theory of Viral Videos

What I found to be acutely interesting about viral videos were the various trends in the ups and downs of their views throughout their lifetimes - how the viewing nature of a video changes throughout its existence. I became curious about how a viral video gets started, falls into fame, and then either dies or lives on. Shaw (2013) describes this phenomenon as the Lifecycle Theory of viral videos. Although the term lifecycle is usually used in biological contexts, it is extremely relevant here to describe how the viral video acts. Looking more profoundly into the Lifecycle Theory is the core of this thesis.

## **Part 3: Methodology**

To begin the research for this thesis, first a set of viral videos to examine was selected. 20 viral videos were selected based on the criteria explained above - videos that had a rapid rise to fame due to social shares and videos that generally have high socialness. The 20 videos were compiled from various sources listing viral videos from the past few years and range from 2006 - 2013. The full list of videos selected is shown in Appendix A.

Next, a method of collecting data for these videos was selected. Because of limitations on what data is publicly available, I was unable to acquire quantitative video view data over time. The next best option was to collect Google Trends data for each video. Although this data, which is web search data, is not exactly the same as video view data, it is still highly representative of the popularity of the videos over time. The quantitative data over time collected from Google Trends was extracted and analyzed for each video.

Additionally, qualitative data was collected for each video through additional research. Information such as upload date, creator of the video, history behind the video, and more was gathered. The context behind the history of each video was essential for making more sense of the quantitative data.

Together, this data was analyzed for trends, outliers, and interesting stories. The final analysis and a few specific case studies are presented below.

# Part 4: Analysis

Figure 3 below shows the data for one video, Harlem Shake, from January 2013 to May 2014 as a representation of the typical shape that these videos exhibit from start to finish. They begin at a near-zero level, have an extremely rapid rise, and then die down at a slower rate back to a near-zero level.

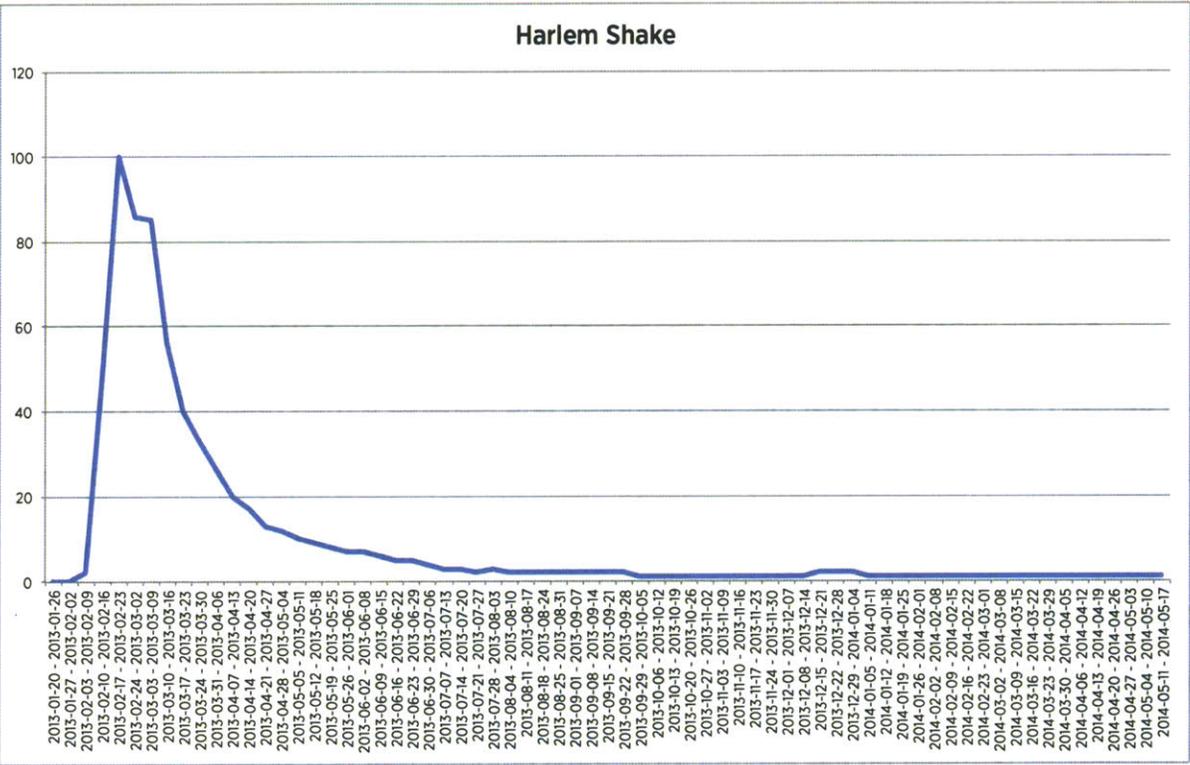


Figure 3: Harlem Shake data over time

From this common shape that is found among almost all the videos, I propose that the Lifecycle Theory be divided into three distinct parts: Growth, Peak, and Decline. The Growth phase begins when the video is uploaded and lasts until the Peak phase,

which is when the video has reached its highest level. The Decline phase starts at the peak and lasts indefinitely. The following case studies will examine each of these stages more closely.

#### 4.1 Case Study: Growth Phase

In all 20 of the videos examined, it took between 7-14 days to reach the peak from a start of zero. Relatively, this is a very short amount of time for something to go from being completely unknown to being extremely popular. This supports the notion that viral videos, aided by the sharing power of social media, can rise to fame in an incredibly short amount of time. How and why does this shot to fame happen? A closer look at the case study Double Rainbow is quite revealing.

A video called “Yosemitebear Mountain Double Rainbow 1-8-10” was uploaded on January 8th, 2010 by user Hungrybear9562 and features a man reacting fervently to a double rainbow in the sky. This particular video, commonly referred to as just Double Rainbow, caught my attention because of the considerable gap between the upload date and the start of its rise. In Figure 4 below, the date of the video’s upload is highlighted in red. However, the video did not begin to gain popularity until much later - the video sat dormant on the Internet for months before it reached virality.

Why is it, then, that this video suddenly gained popularity? After researching the history behind this video, the reason became clear. Jimmy Kimmel, a famous talk show host and comedian, tweeted about the video to his almost three million followers on July 3rd, 2010, declaring that it was “the funniest video in the world” (jimmykimmel, 2010). Once the video’s content reached his followers, they in turn began to share it with their

friends and families. News networks and other celebrities also began to share the video. People like Jimmy Kimmel have been dubbed “tastemakers” – people with high social influence that are often the ones to launch viral videos (Allocca, 2011). Tastemakers can be celebrities like Jimmy Kimmel or popular blogs like The Daily What. These are people and places that people trust to tender interesting content and that they want to be associated with. The sharing is not just about wanting to share a funny video, but also about playing a part in the creation of something new.

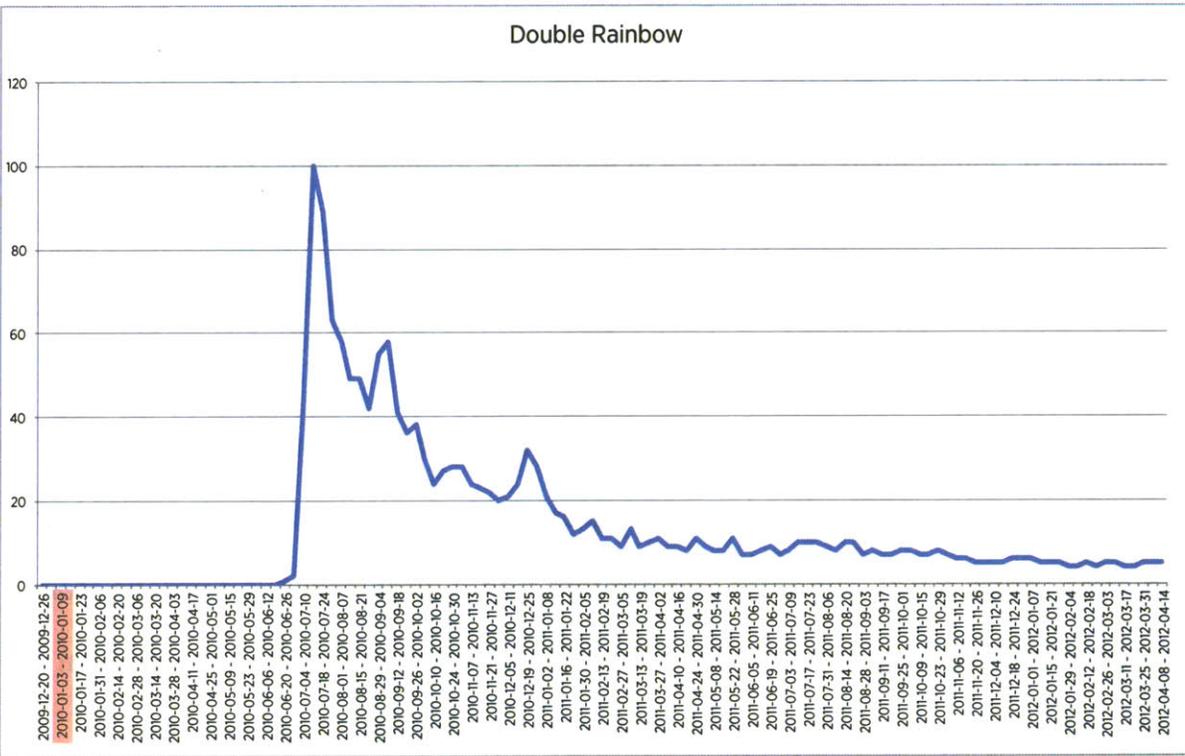


Figure 4: Double Rainbow data over time

Allocca asserts that in reality, it’s these tastemakers, sharers, and community participators - not necessarily the content itself - that truly perpetuates a video to virality.

While the content is important to create interest, the spread is what sets viral videos apart from other kinds of videos.

## 4.2 Case Study: Peak Phase

After a video gains an audience, it creates a vessel for community participation. The audience of a video can react by commenting on the video, showing it to his or her brother at the dinner table, or tweeting about it. This creates a community of people who are now sharing a fun “inside joke” with each other and with a celebrity, which allows for even more re-shares and re-views. Further participation comes in the form of parodies, in which viral videos ignite creative energy in others. Parodies are an integral part of the community of participation, and only act to further the influence of the original video itself. At this point is usually when the video reaches its Peak Phase, after about 7-14 days. To understand this key concept of participation and parodies, Harlem Shake is a great case study to examine.

Although the origin of the Harlem Shake phenomenon is not entirely clear, it is generally accepted that the first video was uploaded by user DizastaMusic on February 2nd, 2013 (Shaw 2013). The video features four men in what looks like a college room dancing to the trap song “Harlem Shake” by DJ and producer Baauer. Once the beat drops, the dancing goes from subtle to extremely over-the-top. Other YouTubers uploaded their own versions of this video that contained the same elements - subtle dancing that turns extreme and the same song. These parodies started to become more and more prevalent. The premise was simple, easy to film and edit, and easy to creatively parody. For this reason, the Harlem Shake trend eventually rose to virality.

Millions of shares, comments, likes, parodies, had been produced. Even companies like Intel and Google produced their own versions of the Harlem Shake within about 2 weeks of the original video's posting.

This level of interactivity allowed Harlem Shake to become more than just a viral video - it became a global phenomenon. Because YouTube truly allows anyone to upload content, it creates a platform for everyday people to express their creativity. People today enjoy creating content and playing a part in creating their own media culture.

#### **4.3 Case Study: Decline Phase**

However, viral videos never stay in the spotlight for too long. After the Peak Phase, they begin to decline at various rates back down to a near-zero level. The time it takes to reach this level tends to be around 4-5 weeks for the videos studied in this research. When compared to something like a Hollywood movie, the entire lifecycle for a viral video is incredibly short. In just a few short weeks, a video goes from not even existing, to having billions of views, to being completely irrelevant. This seems to indicate that for Internet content, people have incredibly short attention spans. Because of the sheer quantity of content to consume, the life of each one is much shorter. What does it take for a viral video to extend its lifespan?

A viral video that was able to do just that is the case Nyan Cat. This is an 8-bit animation of a cat flying through space accompanied by high-pitched, Japanese music. The trending for this viral video, however, is not the same as the many others, as seen

in Figure 5. Nyan Cat has a much slower decline and still has yet to reach the near-zero level.

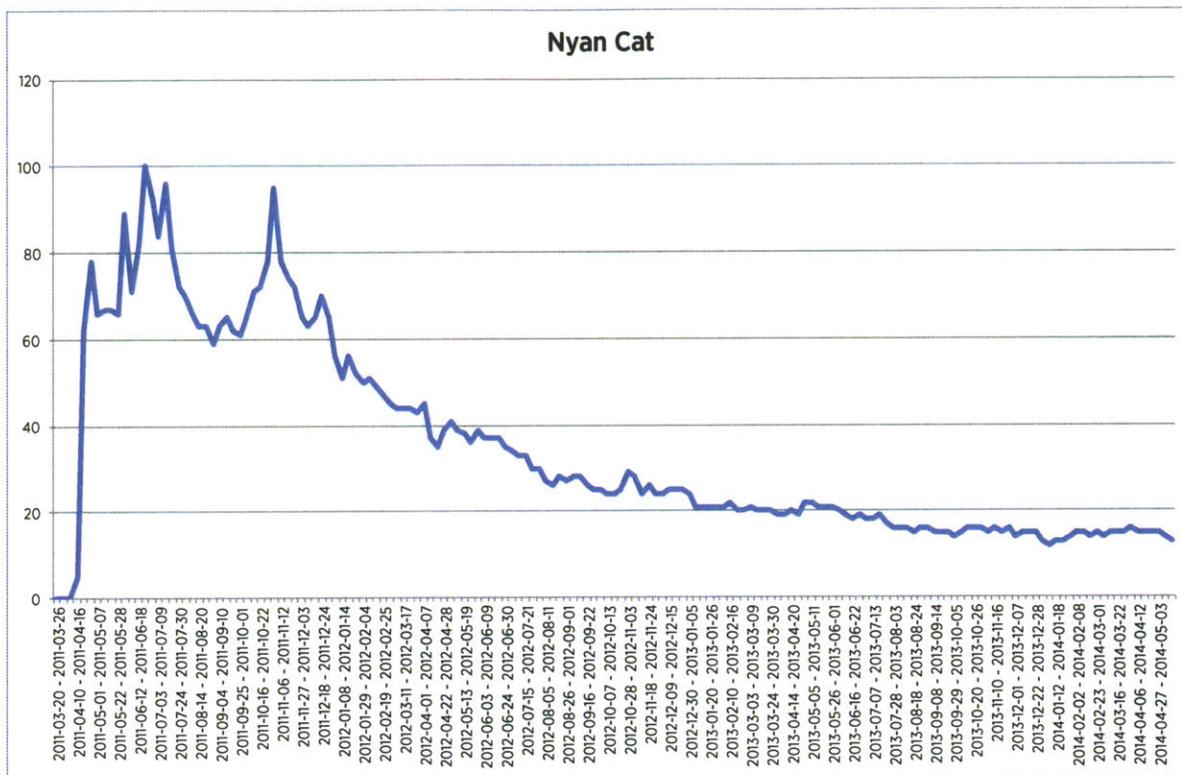


Figure 5: Nyan Cat data over time

Why does this video behave differently? After this video reached virality, it spread throughout the Internet through various mediums and became what is referred to as a meme. People created songs, websites, challenges, games, and more based off of the Nyan Cat video. Because of its adaptation from a simple viral video to a full-fledged Internet meme, Nyan Cat has been able to live on and significantly extend its lifespan from the usual 4-5 weeks.

Another interesting case to look because of its Decline Phase is Rickroll. This video is simply the music video of singer Rick Astley's 1987 single, "Never Gonna Give You Up". The video, however, shot to popularity through its use as an online prank. Fellow users can trick each other by pretending to link to something interesting that they know will be clicked, but instead, it is just Rick Astley's video. This prank began to be called the Rickroll. A closer look at the data in Figure 6 reveals that after its Growth Phase and Peak Phase, during every April of its Decline Phase there is a spike in interest because of friends pranking each other on April Fool's Day. Although Rickroll is dying down as the years go by, it is an example of a viral video that was able to alter its lifecycle in an interesting manner.

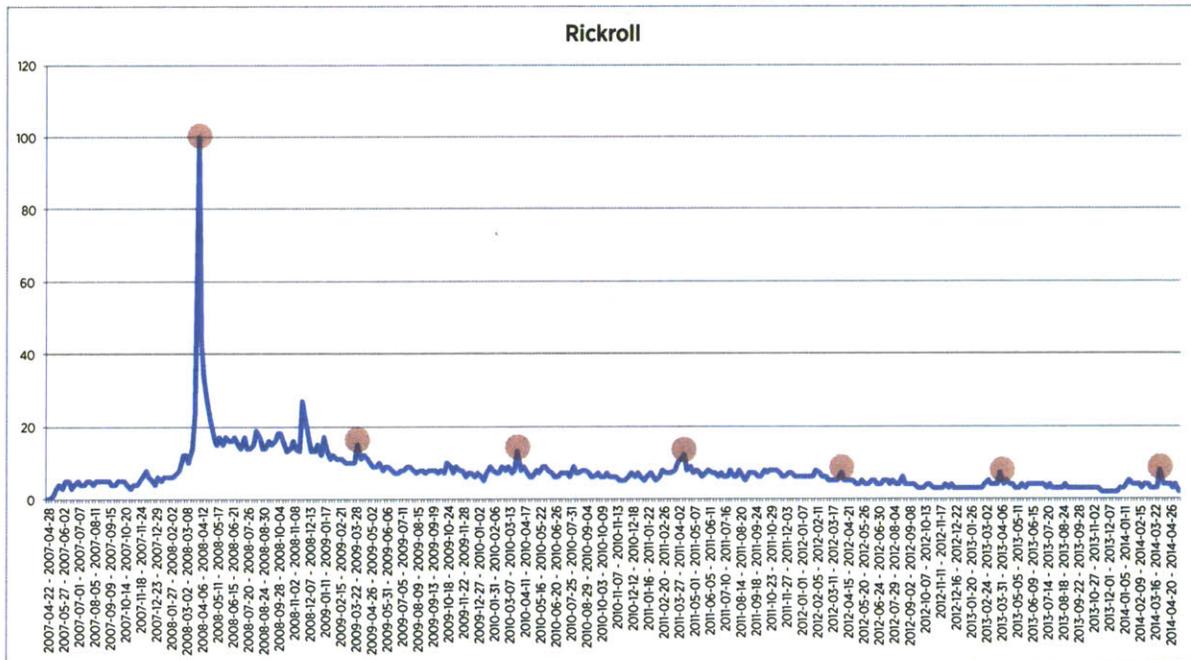


Figure 6: Rickroll data over time

#### 4.4 Internet as Heterotopia

After examining these viral videos via this Lifecycle Theory, the dynamics of the viral video phenomenon are more clear. A trendsetter launches the video to popularity, and it shoots to its peak through shares, comments, and parodies in around 7-14 days. Afterwards, the interest in the video slowly declines and 4-5 weeks later, the interest is back to a near-zero level.

This analysis of virality specifically through viral videos supports the theory of Internet as heterotopia. Michel Foucault's "Of Other Spaces" brings up the notion of heterotopic space: socially constructed "other" places that stand outside of known space (Sherman Young, 1998). Places like cemeteries, zoos, boats, stadiums, or the more abstract example of a mirror.

Because of the way this research has shown that people act on the Internet through viral video usage, it clearly supports that the Internet is a form of heterotopic space. Because the Internet is a space without any materiality, it exists only virtually. Even though it takes up no physical space, it is an extremely powerful medium of communication - this contradiction is highly indicative of heterotopia.

Additionally, we have the Internet's strange relationship with time. As the research presented, the average lifecycle of a viral YouTube video is incredibly short. The accessibility and swiftness of the Internet has created this warped reality of time in its space. This relationship to time is similar to that of museums and fairs, which are both considered heterotopias.

What is most interesting is that, like other heterotopias, this Internet one is completely socially constructed by humans. The way these viral videos spread, become

popular, and then die down, happens in a way that can only happen on the Internet - and humans have socially constructed it to be that way.

## **Part 5: Conclusion**

This thesis proposes the Lifecycle Theory to analyze viral videos and break them down into three stages: Growth Phase, Peak Phase, and Decline Phase. By combining specific quantitative and qualitative data, case studies were examined to more fully understand the growth dynamics. In conclusion, the data speaks to the unique aspects of today's new media culture and supports the concept of Internet as heterotopia.

### **5.1 Improvements**

As noted previously, the analysis was conducted using Google Trends data. Because this is just search data, some of the analysis might have been skewed. Raw video view data could potentially be more revealing, and could be used to do more complicated trend analysis. If referral information were also available, the socialness of videos could also play a part. With this more specific information, more intricate quantitative analysis could have been calculated.

Additionally, it could have been beneficial to supplement this research with an actual controlled experiment involving people. Gathering opinions in some form of experiment could have been interesting, since this is such a subjective subject to be studying.

### **5.2 Future Exploration**

Through my research, I found that videos produced by marketing companies in the more recent years have risen to virality. It would be interesting to look at these viral

video campaigns from big companies to see which ones were able to successfully capture this niche market.

Another aspect of this field that I was unable to look into is the global nature of viral videos. Are there differences or similarities between what videos go viral in various countries? Do different countries have varying sharing trends or patterns? This would definitely be an interesting distinction to make in future research.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: List of videos examined

Video	Year	Link
Sneezing Panda	2006	<a href="http://youtu.be/FzRH3iTQPrk">http://youtu.be/FzRH3iTQPrk</a>
Evolution of Dance	2006	<a href="http://youtu.be/dMH0bHeiRNng">http://youtu.be/dMH0bHeiRNng</a>
Charlie Bit My Finger	2007	<a href="http://youtu.be/_OBlgSz8sSM">http://youtu.be/_OBlgSz8sSM</a>
Leave Brittany Alone	2007	<a href="http://youtu.be/kHmvrRoEowc">http://youtu.be/kHmvrRoEowc</a>
Chocolate Rain	2007	<a href="http://youtu.be/EwTZ2xpQwpA">http://youtu.be/EwTZ2xpQwpA</a>
Keyboard Cat	2007	<a href="http://youtu.be/J---aiyznGQ">http://youtu.be/J---aiyznGQ</a>
Dramatic Chipmunk	2007	<a href="http://youtu.be/a1Y73sPHKxw">http://youtu.be/a1Y73sPHKxw</a>
Rick Roll	2008	<a href="http://youtu.be/dQw4w9WgXcQ">http://youtu.be/dQw4w9WgXcQ</a>
David After Dentist	2009	<a href="http://youtu.be/txqiwrbyGrs">http://youtu.be/txqiwrbyGrs</a>
Double Rainbow	2010	<a href="http://youtu.be/OQSNhk5ICTI">http://youtu.be/OQSNhk5ICTI</a>
Bed Intruder Song	2010	<a href="http://youtu.be/hMtZfW2z9dw">http://youtu.be/hMtZfW2z9dw</a>
Chuck Testa	2011	<a href="http://youtu.be/LJP1DphOWPs">http://youtu.be/LJP1DphOWPs</a>
Nyan Cat	2011	<a href="http://youtu.be/QH2-TGUiWu4">http://youtu.be/QH2-TGUiWu4</a>
Friday - Rebecca Black	2011	<a href="http://youtu.be/kfVsfOSbJY0">http://youtu.be/kfVsfOSbJY0</a>
Talking Twin Babies	2011	<a href="http://youtu.be/_JmA2CIUvUY">http://youtu.be/_JmA2CIUvUY</a>
Gangnam Style	2012	<a href="http://youtu.be/9bZkp7q19f0">http://youtu.be/9bZkp7q19f0</a>
Catch the Ice Dude	2012	<a href="http://youtu.be/zd7c5tQCsl">http://youtu.be/zd7c5tQCsl</a>
Ain't Nobody Got Time for That	2012	<a href="http://youtu.be/bFEoMO0pc7k">http://youtu.be/bFEoMO0pc7k</a>
Harlem Shake	2013	<a href="http://youtu.be/8vJiSSAMNWw">http://youtu.be/8vJiSSAMNWw</a>
What Does the Fox Say	2013	<a href="http://youtu.be/jofNR_WkoCE">http://youtu.be/jofNR_WkoCE</a>