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Viral Dissemination of Content in Advertising: Emotional Factors to Reach Consumers

Abstract

Social media has become a relevant content dissemination channel in recent years. Each user has the capacity to potentially reach others, and in this way, social media challenges the traditional distribution of content through mass media. The advertising industry has had to adapt to this new ecosystem and develop audiovisual pieces specifically tailored to this environment as part of their communication strategies. These pieces aim at achieving not only views but to engage viewers in sharing content with their contacts. Recent research indicates that there are certain aspects of human behaviour related to emotions and motivations that have an impact on the decision to share information, news and content with others. However, there are few studies analysing how the features of the content shared influence that decision. This article presents the content analysis results of the 100 most widely shared advertising viral videos around the world from 2011 to 2015 according to Adweek. The analysis was conducted from an emotional perspective in order to establish the common features of the most shared videos and to identify the frequency in which emotional narrative resources are used.

Keywords

Advertising, viral video, social media, content analysis, emotions.

1. Introduction

The current information ecosystem does not just analyse content reach in terms of the sum of individuals directly exposed to content, but also in terms of their capacity to redistribute it within their community of contacts (Jenkins, Li, Domb & Green, 2008; Martínez-Rolán & Piñeiro-Otero, 2016; Papacharissi, 2014). Cappella, Kim & Albarracín (2015) consider that this dissemination process in two phases –direct exposure to the media and secondary exposure to the information through social media– is the most relevant feature of the current new media environment.

The concept of ‘media virus’ suggested by Rushkoff (1994) was soon adopted by the marketing world (Rayport, 1996) in order to overcome mass rejection of advertising by consumers. Viral marketing camouflages that the message is advertising and makes the best of the contact network of individuals as their distribution channel. Besides, the dissemination of content or services is free of charge and simple as it may be broadcasted by the user. Viral

marketing appeals to the audience's interest to share content and uses existing distribution networks that the advertiser does not need to own (Welker, 2002).

Despite the fact that the motivations of individuals are not homogeneous (Amichai-Hamburger, 2002), there is some consensus around the influence of three personality dimensions that affect on-line communications and relationships: openness, understood as a creative, innovative and tolerant attitude; extraversion, understood as sociability, assertiveness and enthusiasm; and neuroticism (related to emotional stability and self-confidence) (Amichai-Hamburger, 2002; Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000; Correa, Hinsley & de Zúñiga, 2010; Ehrenberg, Juckes, White & Walsh, 2008; Ross *et al.*, 2009; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008).

Furthermore, there are some motivations in individuals, influenced by the personality traits we have mentioned, that play a role in the decision to share content. In any communication process we can find three types of objectives (Clark & Delia, 1979): instrumental, to solve the situation that produced the communicational exchange; interpersonal, to establish or maintain the relationship between the speakers; and identifying, to project a particular image of the participants. These general principles are also applicable to on-line communication. There is a general consensus regarding the fact that motivations such as altruism (Feinberg, Willer, Stellar & Keltner, 2012; Ho & Dempsey, 2010; Kümpel, Karnowski & Keyling, 2015; Oh, 2012; Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry & Raman, 2004), entertainment (Baek, Holton, Harp & Yaschur, 2011; Berger, 2014; Holton, Baek, Coddington & Yaschur, 2014), the need to belong and social validation (Cappella *et al.*, 2015; Guadagno, Rempala, Murphy & Okdie, 2013; Lundgren & Prislín, 1998; Scholz *et al.*, 2017) and the construction of identity (Barasch & Berger, 2014; Kümpel *et al.*, 2015; Lee & Ma, 2012) have become the main motives to share content.

Apart from the personality of the individual and their motives, there is a third factor at play in the decision to share content that Dobeles, Lindgreen, Beverland, Vanhamme, & van Wijk (2007, p. 292) describe as follows: "for viral marketing to work, there must be something uniquely powerful about the message, something that encourages would-be advocates to pass it on." Research in this field so far has highlighted that the key element in the message that might light the fire of virality is the emotion that content generates in the audience (Botha & Reyneke, 2013).

While the study of emotion and its influence on communication has witnessed a remarkable increase in recent decades (Serrano-Puche, 2016), this is still one of the most interdisciplinary and complex fields within psychology (Plutchik, 2001, p. 344).

For decades, the emotional dimension of advertising was subjected to the idea that a prior cognitive process was needed for decision making (Morris, Woo, Geason & Kim, 2002). It was not until the 1980s when this idea was challenged with the theory that explains that most decisions a person makes throughout their lives have more to do with emotion than with reason, from day-to-day instinctive reactions to life-changing decisions (Zajonc, 1980).

This research field on the influence of emotion in advertising has developed greatly and significantly in recent years, particularly in terms of methodology, thanks to neuroscience applied to marketing, in the general framework of consumer neuroscience (Cruz, De Medeiros, Hermes, Marcon & Marcon, 2016; Fisher, Chin & Klitzman, 2010). No doubt, progress in this discipline has shown the key role of emotion as a regulator of behaviour and social interactions (Adolphs, 2003), as a fast response and decision making mechanism alien to rational control (Damasio, 2001; Giovanni Vecchiato *et al.*, 2014) or as memory boosters (Damasio, 2001); all these are aspects of great relevance to study advertising. We currently know that the emotional response to advertising is an important indicator of the attitude a consumer has *vis-a-vis* a brand and a predictor of their behaviour towards it (Morris *et al.*, 2002). In this way, advertisements using emotional content generate a deeper connection between the consumer and the brand than those using rational argumentation (Micu &

Plummer, 2010). Emotional content also has an impact on the attention paid to advertising (Nomura & Mitsukura, 2015; Teixeira, 2012; Vecchiato *et al.*, 2014; Vecchiato *et al.*, 2010). Teixeira, Wedel and Pieters (2012) confirm that –mainly– surprise and –to a lesser extent– joy influence the attention paid by viewers to spots and that both emotions have an impact on the decision to continue watching a commercial; in this case joy has more weight on the decision.

But the influence of an emotional content on memory, interest and the decision to watch an advertisement until the end, are not the only reasons to engage with the content produced by a brand nowadays, as “the act of sharing means that there is a symbolic link between the content shared, the personality of the user sharing it, and the perception of the community it is shared with” (Dafonte-Gómez, 2014, p. 200). Therefore, the decision of a user to share content with their contacts has an impact that is larger than simply watching an advertisement until the end or individual viewing out of pleasure.

Current research on how emotion influences the decision to share content broadly indicates that content that generates a strong emotional impact on individuals, regardless of whether the impact is positive or negative, is most likely to become viral (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Berger, 2011; Heath, 1996; Heath, Bell & Sternberg, 2001; Peters, Kashima & Clark, 2009). More specifically, research studies by Berger and Milkman (2012); Dobele *et al.* (2007); Eckler and Bolls (2011); Guadagno, Rempala, Murphy and Okdie (2013) and Teixeira (2012) suggest that, in a more specific way, content that conveys pleasurable emotions such as surprise or joy increases the chances of viralization. Most of these studies are within the field of reception and reflect the perceptions of subjects who are exposed to certain selected messages and state their intention whether to share these messages with their contacts or not.

Finally, we must also remember that one of the most widely discussed formal features of on-line video content is duration.

According to Hubspot and AdAge, the duration of an on-line video depends on the objectives of the video and the social network where it is to be disseminated. In the case of videos uploaded to YouTube, Hubspot, the general guidelines are to keep them below 2 minutes (Chi, 2017). Data from the Video in Business Benchmark Report (Vidyard, 2017) indicate that 56% of all corporate videos –including any video and device– are below 2 minutes and 73% are below 4 minutes. They also highlight that shorter videos keep viewers hooked longer than those that last longer. Wistia also indicates that after 2 minutes, engagement levels significantly go down (Fishman, 2016). The Viewer Engagement Research published in 2015 by Visible Measures and quoted by AdAge (Pedersen, 2015) and the American Marketing Association (Steimer, 2017) shows that 33% of the people who start watching a video on social media stop after the first 30 seconds and that, after 2 minutes, only 40% of those who started watching it still continue.

2. Methodology

So far, we have explained the importance of content viralization in the current advertising scenario and the most important effects of emotion on the reception of advertisement and the decision to share visual content. Using this background, this article crosschecks the results obtained by previous studies, most of them based on self-reporting and physiological measurements, with content analysis of the 100 most successful viral video commercials of the years 2011 to 2015. The objective is to confirm if emotional elements underlined by previous research as support in the decision to share content can be consistently identified in the sample of these 100 most widely shared videos in this 5-year period.

2.1. Research Objectives

- O1. To identify the frequency with which emotional narrative resources are used in the most successful viral video commercials and to test whether this correlates with the main findings of previous research.

- O2. To determine what features are shared by the most successful viral video commercials.

2.2. Hypothesis

The most important research hypothesis relates to the emotional dimension of the most widely shared content:

- H1. Positive emotions are prevalent in the most successful viral video commercials, mainly surprise and joy.

As secondary hypothesis, related to the formal features of content, we suggest:

- H2. Viral commercials have a global scope and address an international market.
- H3. The length of most viral commercials is less than two minutes.

2.3. Sample

The sample includes the most widely shared video commercials from 2011 to 2015. The selection criterion was the number of times the content was shared in the year it was broadcasted and not the accrued number of views until the moment the data was registered. Therefore, the sample is structured into 5 annual blocks from 2011 to 2015, including the 20 most widely shared video commercials each year. For the sample selection we use the Unruly Media data published every year by Adweek as the industry benchmark (Nudd, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). We considered that, while a successful viral video achieves millions of views, the defining feature of a viral video is that it has been massively shared.

2.4. Procedure

The methodology we have used is content analysis by three trained coders (the authors) on the total sample using a pre-designed score card, which can be seen below in its simplified format.

For each of the sample units, we registered all the following data: title, year, advertiser, number of shares and duration with the following categories and sub-categories as per this abridged version (Table 1).

Table 1: Score Card.

Variables	Values	Explanation
Type of advertiser	Company	The advertiser offers services or products against payment
	Institution, NGO	The advertiser is a non-profit institution
Target market	Global	The product, service or cause is in the international arena
	Local	The product, service or cause is linked to the market of a country
Type of goods	Film	The piece announces a film premier
	Videogame	The piece announces the launch of a videogame
	TV content	The piece announces a TV or VOD launch
	General consumers	The piece advertises consumer services or goods
	PSA	The piece is a Public Service Announcement (PSA)
Type of Content	Spot	The formal and narrative features of the piece respond to that of a TV spot
	Branded Content	The piece is brand content with commercial purposes
	Video clip	The audiovisual narration is based on music and the choreography of visual elements
	Trailer	The piece is a trailer, teaser or sneak peek of audiovisual content
Voice-over	Yes	Voice-over is necessary to understand the piece
	No	No voice-over or its presence is so discreet that it does not affect the audience's understanding of the piece
Presence of attraction elements	Participation of celebrities	A celebrity is the main character of the piece
	Humour	Humour is used as a narrative resource
	Eroticism	The human body is used as an object of sexual desire
	Violence	Physical or verbal aggression is represented
Presence of emotions	Surprise	Narrative resources that generate surprise are used (plot, characters, artistic direction, sound and editing)
	Joy	Narrative resources that generate joy are used (plot, characters, artistic direction, sound and editing)
	Sadness	Narrative resources that generate sadness are used (plot, characters, artistic direction, sound and editing)
	Anger	Narrative resources that generate anger are used (plot, characters, artistic direction, sound and editing)
	Fear	Narrative resources that generate fear are used (plot, characters, artistic direction, sound and editing)
	Disgust	Narrative resources that generate disgust are used (plot, characters, artistic direction, sound and editing)

Source: Own elaboration.

In order to create the score card, we took as reference those used by Dobele *et al.* (2007) and by Dafonte-Gómez (2014). For each sample unit, both studies use the “basic” emotions defined by Ekman in the 1970s through a series of studies of facial expression (Ekman & Friesen, 1975) as variables in the emotion category. Despite the fact that there is no agreement in this field, according to recent research by Ekman (2016) there is a strong consensus amongst experts in emotion in identifying anger, fear, disgust, sadness and happiness (linked to joy), while surprise is in the second group of emotions, backed up by around 50% of the scientific community. However, this is an emotion that is widely present in previous studies on viral content (Dafonte-Gómez, 2014; Dobele *et al.*, 2007; Teixeira *et al.*, 2012), and that is the reason why it has been included in this study.

As the most important objective of this study is to establish relationships between the emotional content of the advertisements and their success in terms of virality, the units used to measure this objective relate to the presence of narrative elements referred to or potentially triggering each of the six basic emotions. Therefore, we have the following items for each sample unit (Krippendorff, 2004): plot, characters, artistic direction, sound and editing. Emotional references shared by codifiers are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Description of Emotions.

Emotion	Explanation	Experiences related with the emotion
Surprise	Generated when something (product, service, or attribute) is unexpected.	surprise, amazement, and astonishment
Joy	Expressed when a goal has been achieved, or when movement toward such an achievement has occurred. Also, joy is caused by a rational prospect of owning what we love or desire.	joyful, delighted, and happy
Sadness	Experienced when not in a state of well-being, which is most often derived from the experience of a fearful event.	distressed, sad, and downhearted
Anger	Response to personal offense (an injustice); this injustice is in that person's power to settle.	discouraged, mad, and enraged
Fear	Experienced when people expect (anticipate) a specific pain, threat, or danger.	afraid, scared, and fearful
Disgust	Feeling of aversion that can be felt either when something happens or when something is perceived to be disgusting.	disgusted, distaste, and revolted

Source: Dobele *et al.*, 2007.

The results obtained by each of the coders were subjected to a triangulation process to minimize individual biases and increase consistency (Denzin, 1978).

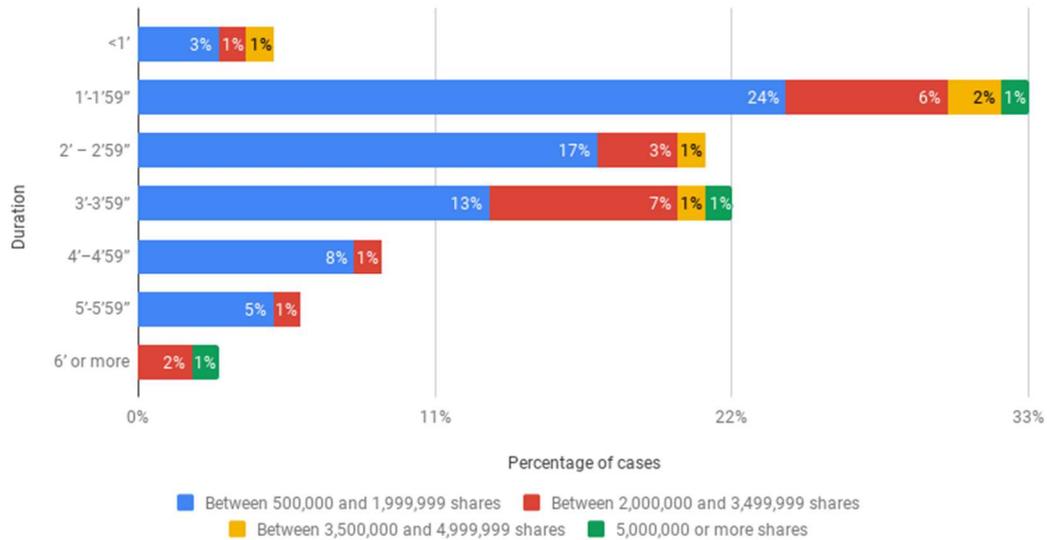
3. Results

The sample includes 100 videos that range between 529,832 and 10,068,928 shares of the least and most widely shared videos, respectively. The average in the sample is 1,696,480 shares and it has witnessed an increasing trend from 2011 to 2015, with a significant decline in 2014 (2011: 1,203,792 average shares; 2012: 1,834,396 average shares; 2013: 1,981,338 average shares; 2014: 1,451,880 average shares; 2,010,993 average shares). Most of the videos (71%) do not reach 2 million shares and only 3% are above 5 million.

Regarding the duration of the videos, it is below 2 minutes in 38% of the cases, and around 2 and 3'59" in 43% of the videos, with an average duration of 3'2". Videos over 6' have a much higher average share than the rest, although this distortion is due to the presence of a single video (Kony) that exceeds 10 million shares; in case of excluding the referred piece, it is noted that videos between 3 'and 3'59' reach a higher average of shares, followed by very short videos, of less than one minute. According to Pearson correlation coefficient, there is a moderate positive correlation between the duration of the videos and the number of shares ($r = 0.46$).

Of the eight most widely shared videos (with over 3,500,000 shares), seven last less than four minutes, although the most widely shared video by far, Kony's video, is almost half an hour long (Figure 1). In order to present the data related to the most widely disseminated videos of the sample, we choose to refer to the first eight, which in all cases exceed 3,500,000 shares.

Figure 1: Relationship between Duration and Number of Shares.



Source: Own elaboration.

Most of the videos in the sample belong to companies that commercialize consumer products through content videos or spots. According to Pearson correlation coefficient, none of these elements (type of advertiser, type of good and type of content) shows significant relationships with the number of shares reached by the videos. The 66% of the videos in the sample target the global market and amongst the eight most widely shared videos only one, the one ranking seventh, aims at a local market (the US market). Of the non-global videos in the sample, most are from the US or UK (11% and 9% in the entire sample). Of the 23 videos not having a global scope or targeting the United States, only 3 are over two million shares. The average of shares is slightly higher in global videos than in those in specific countries (1,793,420 shares compared to 1,508,300).

The sample shows 56% of videos without voice-over; 36% with voice-over in English and 8% in other languages. Of this last group, only one is over two million shares, while the eight most viral videos are in English and five do not include voice-over. Overall, videos without voice-over achieve a higher average of shares than those with voice-over (1,774,363 compared to 1,597,355).

Looking at the number of attraction elements considered, we need to highlight that 69% of the videos in the sample do not feature celebrities and of the eight most widely shared videos, only the third and the eighth do. Regarding humour, it is only found in 38% of the videos, while it is not present in the three most widely shared videos. Violence is present in 9% of the videos, including the most widely shared one. Erotic content is rare: it is only found in 5% of videos and none of them is over three and a half million shares.

Regarding the presence of emotional elements, the most widely present are those causing surprise. They are found in 76% of the videos, and in particular in six of the eight most widely shared videos (but not in the most widely shared one). Joy ranks second and is found in 68% of videos, including the eight most widely shared ones. Sadness is present in 8% of the videos. Fear, disgust and rage are hardly present in the sample (Table 3).

Table 3: Presence of Emotions in the Sample Videos Versus the Number of Shares.

Shares	Presence of Surprise		Presence of Fear		Presence of Sadness		Presence of Joy		Presence of Disgust		Presence of Rage	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Between 500,000 and 1,999,999	54	17	1	70	5	66	45	26	0	71	0	71
Between 2,000,000 and 3,499,999	16	5	1	20	2	19	15	6	1	20	0	21
Between 3,500,000 and 4,999,999	5	0	0	5	0	5	5	0	0	5	0	5
5,000,000 or more	1	2	0	3	1	2	3	0	0	3	0	3
Total of videos	76	24	2	98	8	92	68	32	1	99	0	100

Source: Own elaboration.

The elements to introduce surprise and joy are found together in 52% of the videos in the sample. Likewise, in the eight videos where sadness is found, this is the only emotion present in just one; in two cases this is combined with surprise and in two more with joy, while in three videos the three emotions are found together. Elements related to negative and rare emotions such as fear and disgust are also combined with surprise in all the videos whenever they are present in the sample.

On the other hand, it is observed that if Kony's video is excluded, humour and joy are the only variables within the attraction elements and emotions that increase the average of shares (Table 4).

Table 4: Relation between the Presence or Absence of Attraction Elements and Emotions and the Average Number of Shares.

		Average number of shares		SD	
		YES	NO	YES	NO
Attraction elements	Celebrities	1,486,369	1,790,877	1,141,079	1,529,316
	Humour	1,737,183	1,671,533	1,147,200	1,580,622
	Eroticism	1,443,007	1,709,820	614,963	1,452,193
	Violence (*excluding Kony's video)	2,421,597 (*1,465,681)	1,624,765	3,072,063 (*1,177,692)	1,151,729
Frequent emotions ¹	Surprise	1,632,916	1,897,764	1,134,955	2,107,909
	Joy	1,887,961	1,289,583	1,635,274	650,720
	Sadness (*excluding Kony's video)	2,626,013 (*1,565,739)	1,615,651	3,104,194 (*830,795)	1,172,574

¹ Fear, anger and rage have not been included due to their scarce presence.

Source: Own elaboration.

4. Conclusions and Discussion

Regarding the first hypothesis, the results confirm that videos with surprising elements and those triggering joy have a high presence in the list of most successful ones. In this sense, the results are consistent with the research by Dobeles *et al.* (2007), Eckler & Bolls (2011), Teixeira, Wedel & Pieters (2012), Guadagno, Rempala, Murphy & Okdie (2013), Dafonte-Gómez (2014) or Nomura & Mitsukura (2015). The presence of negative emotions is practically residual in the sample and almost non-existent in the most widely shared videos, except for the video with more shares, where sadness is combined with joy, an effect Teixeira (2012) refers to as

an “emotional roller coaster” and which she thinks is very efficient in terms of virality. This effect is seen in many other videos where emotions are combined; surprise and joy are linked in more than half of the videos in the sample and negative emotions are never on their own.

Violent content, with erotic content, are scarce in the sample, in particular in the most widely shared videos. Considering that violence and eroticism can be two attraction elements with high probability of searches and views, their absence in this sample may be justified by two reasons. First, that the producers of the videos are companies or organizations that aim at selling a product or idea in a public context and these topics can be seen as taboo in the framework of commercial messages that are also broadcasted internationally. Second, because even if users watch content of this type, they may be reluctant to share it outside their private sphere.

Other attraction elements such as humour can also be subjected to cultural interpretation and may be counterproductive in terms of understanding or interpretation in international markets. This may justify that their presence, while it is higher than that of violence or eroticism and can contribute to the increase of shares, is not as relevant as one could expect (they are present in just 38% of all videos in the sample).

The presence of celebrities is still more limited (30% of the videos), and this strengthens the idea that these messages try to be free from cultural markers and that bonding is developed through universal content and emotions, rather than through the presence of celebrities.

Regarding the second hypothesis, it is confirmed that most viral commercials have a global character and address an international market. This has an impact on the presence of voice-over and the possibility of a video being shared: videos without voice over or in English are more in number and have higher levels of virality than those in other languages. After this outcome, a more specific analysis of the videos that, not fulfilling these premises, have still made it to the 20-most viral videos of their year seems advisable. Here we find three videos from Thailand, one from China and videos from Turkey, India and the Philippines. They all use storytelling as a narrative resource, the presence of universal values such as solidarity or love, and a high level of emotionality. Other non-global videos in the sample (Spain, Belgium, Italy, China and France) show lower doses of emotionality, although they all want to surprise the viewer through experiments or experiences on the street and address themes that are more or less universal.

Other aspects such as the type of advertiser, the type of good or content being promoted do not seem to be related to the number of shares reached, and they are therefore not relevant when generating virality.

Regarding the third hypothesis about the length of most viral commercials, this could not be confirmed. Although few videos in the sample are significantly long (most of them are not over four minutes), 62% of the videos are two minutes or longer. Considering the studies mentioned before and advocating for two minutes as the interest and attention barrier for on-line videos, one could state that most of the advertising videos that have become viral in recent years are above the maximum recommended duration. This does not mean, however, that they have been watched fully by the individuals who have shared them. In fact, the most viral video in the sample by far is also the longest (Kony 2012); the duration, in fact, is a feature which makes its consideration as viral “advertising” arguable. Still, this does not speak against its virality level and how it breaks from the usual trend of shorter videos being more likely to be watched, and therefore shared. As this is an advocacy video promoted by an NGO, we could argue that the video might have been shared by individuals who have not watched it fully because they may still want to show their commitment to the cause by the act of sharing. In fact, supporting social causes or brands people feel some affinity towards, is one of the most important motives to share content according to the reports “Why people share on social

media?” (OgilvyRED, 2014) and “The Psychology Of Sharing: Why Do People Share Online?” (The New York Times Customer Insight Group, 2011).

On the other hand, the analysis performed confirms that there is an increase in the average of shares in consecutive years. Therefore, there is a significant increase of 67% in 2015 compared to 2011. This may be due to several factors, such as the proliferation and higher use of mobile devices with broadband, the increase of digital video in terms of advertisement investment. This upward trend was only interrupted in 2014 for no apparent reason; that year the top of the ranking is the Activia video with Shakira and Carlinhos Brown (La La La, Brazil 2014), shared 5.82 million times and third in the whole sample, as it was linked to a great sports event, the FIFA World Cup 2014 in Brazil. However, we have to go to the twenty fourth position in the sample to find the second viral video of 2014, with just 2,150,000 shares.

Finally, we have to highlight that the three videos in the sample with the largest number of shares by far show varied features. Therefore, while some patterns on the elements that may influence the possibilities of a material becoming viral can be established, the phenomenon of virality is due to diverse causes and can be either due to a single feature or to the right combination of factors that may motivate the user enough to share the content. However, amongst the limitations of the study, one has to highlight that there are factors that may have an influence on virality that have not been the object of this study, such as the incidence of events of world impact, such as large sports competitions, or aspects derived from the strategies of the advertiser. The fact that a piece has been prepared for social media, that it is adapted from a advertising campaign or that the approach is more focused on generating word-of-mouth or publicity also needs to be considered. This is the reason why some of these aspects may be analysed in future studies, as well as an increase in the spectrum of emotions studied.

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