

MPC MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

Video Virality and Persuasive Power: *It's Time* and Marriage Equality

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Abstract

This master's research project will analyze the rhetorical persuasive appeals found in a YouTube video released by Australian community advocacy group Get Up!, in support of marriage equality in Australia. The video, entitled *It's Time*, was released in November 2011 and has since been viewed nearly 8 million times. This paper will identify what persuasive appeals are present in the video that may have contributed to its virality. This paper will also analyze the public YouTube comments to identify what persuasive appeals are evident in comments to either support or oppose the video's cause, and comments will serve as a measure of the video's success in driving support for marriage equality. Ultimately this paper aims to understand what makes a successful viral cause-related video, and if the video in question was successful in encouraging active participation in the cause amongst those who commented on the video. Active participation of users will be determined through the primary measure of the video's success – comments.

Introduction

For decades, video has been used as a tool to promote and support a variety of causes. Video has been used to promote the charitable efforts of not-for-profit organizations, to disseminate the political agendas and aid in wartime propaganda, and became a quintessential part of music history with the introduction of the music video to accompany song. 2005 was a year that saw the introduction of the most significant recent change to the history of video – YouTube. YouTube has changed the way charitable organizations and social causes function. Increasingly we are seeing the use of YouTube to promote social causes. YouTube allows the organizations or sponsors of such causes to promote and increase the visibility of the cause, but also allows for engagement and feedback through user comments, sharing with other social networks, and “liking” or “disliking” the video by clicking the “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” buttons. However, for the most part, charitable organizations or sponsors of social causes typically post promotional videos on YouTube to garner support and buy-in from the general public. This persuasive function is particularly true of cause-related YouTube videos for controversial social issues.

Legalization of gay marriage – or marriage equality – is one such controversial social issue that has graced the covers of newspapers, has remained in the headlines, and that has been hotly debated online in recent years. Australia is one of the few “First World” democratic countries that has yet to pass legislation for marriage equality,

the topic of marriage equality remaining a national debate. In November 2011, Australian social advocacy group Get Up! released the YouTube video *It's Time* in support of marriage equality. The video caught the attention of mainstream press and quickly went viral, being shared throughout social networking sites.

This research paper will use *It's Time* as a case study, which is being examined for its persuasive appeals and the measurable success of the video. For the purposes of this research paper, the primary measure of its success will be the video comments.

There are two key areas of research that this paper will explore. Firstly, it will examine the persuasive power of *It's Time* through an analysis of the rhetorical persuasive appeals utilized. Secondly it will assess the virality and success of the video, as demonstrated through the video views and comments. Through an analysis of a limited data set of viewer comments, this paper will shed some light on the video's success in persuading audiences to support marriage equality. The video's success will be assessed through the limited comments that have been analyzed for the scope of this research project.

Research Questions

My research is interested in what makes a video go viral. Through my literature review I aimed to establish what *viral* or *virality* means, what the basic characteristics and benefits of a viral videos are, and gain some insight as to what might contribute to a video going viral. To support my research I have two research questions that help analyze *It's Time*:

RQ1: How are persuasive appeals used in the YouTube video *It's Time*?

RQ2: What do the sample viewer comments suggest in terms of the video's success in persuading audiences to support marriage equality?

Theoretical Context

This study focuses on the persuasive appeals in a cause-related YouTube video.

Therefore, my study will be grounded in classical rhetoric and Aristotle's notions of Ethos, Pathos, and Logos.

The term *rhetoric* has been defined differently among scholars, to suit the purpose of their respective research. Historically, the term is derived from the Greek *rhētorikós*, 'the art of speaking' or using language to persuade and influence (Richards, 2008). According to Lester C. Olson, Cara A. Finnegan, and Diane S. Hope, rhetoric "seeks and creates public audiences through symbolic identifications situated in specific historical times, places, and contexts" (Olson et al., 2008).

Rhetoric as a theory can be traced back to Ancient Greece, where early thinkers Plato and Aristotle set the framework for the study of rhetoric, a framework that is still widely cited and respected today. Plato first explores rhetoric in his famous work *Gorgias*, attacking demagogic speakers for using pleasure to manipulate their audiences (Olmsted, 2006), and contrasts truth-seeking philosophers with the 'sophist', a teacher of mere rhetoric (Richards, 2008). Aristotle passionately responded to *Gorgias* in his work *Rhetoric*, rejecting earlier emphasis on emotion and making argument the central issue of rhetoric (Olmsted, 2006). Aristotle's *Rhetoric* outlines strategies of rhetorical persuasion and specific terms for readers to use to inform their own interpretations of arguments (Olmsted, 2006). Ethos,

Pathos and Logos, also known as the rhetorical triangle, are the three strategies or modes of persuasion that Aristotle first coined.

Ethos is focused on the power of credibility. For instance, the persuasive power of ethos lies in its establishment of the persuader's good character and credibility (Rife, 2010). Further elements of ethos include "good character, personal qualities, connotations, and affective influence" (Rife, 2010). Persuasive appeals to ethos are commonly found in advertising for healthcare products, companies that aim to market their products as reliable, trusted, and physician recommended. Pathos is the mode of persuasion most concerned with emotion. Persuasive appeals to pathos aim to drive an emotional response from audiences, by establishing the appropriate mood and playing on the audiences' feelings (Rife, 2010). Persuasive appeals to pathos are commonly found in advertising for social causes and charities, such as advertisements that feature social minorities such as the homeless, abused women or children, and the elderly. Ethos and Pathos often work together to create a stronger persuasive appeal. Martine Courant Rife (2010) notes, "...ethos first secures the audience's sympathy through the speaker's credibility, verifying the speaker's conviction. Once the audience feels secure, this sense of security is played upon by the emotional appeal, efficiently increasing the level of persuasion" (Rife, 2010).

Logos is focused on logic, reasoning, or the rational argument (Rife, 2010). Logical appeals to logos are commonly found in health and safety advertisements, such as

smoking cessation, impaired driving, or car advertisements, each which emphasize safety. In many cases appeals to Logos overlap with appeals to Pathos.

Given that this paper is focused on the rhetorical appeals in a short video clip, I will also reference notions of visual rhetoric to provide additional theoretical support to my research. Visual rhetoric can be defined as the “symbolic actions enacted primarily through visual means, made meaningful through culturally derived ways of looking and seeing and endeavoring to influence diverse publics” (Olson et al., 2008).

The use of visual rhetoric became particularly prevalent in the 19th and 20th century, as the world saw the development of mediated image culture. This included the rise of static media (posters, photographs) and moving media (film, television and digital media). The cultural impact of these images, and the public’s insatiable hunger for them, has led to the time period being dubbed *ocularcentric* – or eye centred (Gronbeck, 2008).

It is important to note the power that images hold. For example, images of the time held significant power to influence political and social life and impact ethical and moral judgments (Gronbeck, 2008). In the early 20th century posters took centre stage as the primary effective means of political communication, reaching their apex as a political tool in World War I (Gronbeck, 2008). Posters were used to influence, serving as a call to action for citizens to support a cause, and in some cases even worked to achieve major political reforms and revolutions (Gronbeck, 2008).

Photographs and film also held great power to influence. For instance, Gronbeck notes, “the realism of photos, in combination with eyewitness journalism, created a potent rhetorical combination” (Gronbeck, 2008). Conversely, film was used to create some of the most influential vehicles of political indoctrination, such as several infamous WWII propaganda films.

Moreover, images play a significant role in knowledge production. There is a longstanding historical association between sight or visuals and knowledge. This association can be traced back to key words in ancient Greek and Latin. For instance, the Greek words *theoria* (knowledge) and *theoros* (witness) are rooted in sight, while the Latin word *imago* comes from the infinitive “to see” (Gronbeck, 2008).

Literature Review

Scholars who have studied virality have focused on a number of different features, including viral videos and their characteristics, benefits of viral videos, and trends in the causes of video virality.

The Phenomenon of Video Virality

In the late twentieth century video content was controlled and distributed by large commercial broadcast networks, with three major networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC, essentially controlling the media landscape. These organizations determined what television content was broadcast, and thereby shaped what became popular.

However, the power to determine popularity has become democratized, with the rise of social networking sites (SNS) and user-generated content on popular platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and BuzzFeed (Broxton et al. 2011). SNS played a significant role in the rise of short online videos, videos that lack both the quality and format for traditional broadcasting. Broxton et al. (2011) note that people have come to rely on SNS such as Facebook and Twitter to view this video content, partly because of the overwhelming quantity of videos on sites like YouTube, and because of an inherent desire for recommended content. Such videos, that become popular through online sharing have come to be termed *viral videos*. The term *viral* itself can be etymologically linked to the word “virus”. For example, Shifman (2011) compares “viral” to “virus”, noting that such videos are “tagged as

viral since they spread rapidly from person to person like an epidemic.” Shifman (2011) draws on observations made by Burgess (2008) and Knobel and Lankshear (2007), defining a *viral video* as “a clip that spreads to the masses via digital word-of-mouth mechanisms”.

However, the term “viral” is not limited to its use to describe highly shared videos; it is becoming increasingly relevant in marketing and advertising. In *Viral Advertising: Definitional Review and Synthesis*, Maria Petrescu and Pradeep Korgaonkar provide an overview of the prominent academic terminology involving virality, including terms such as *electronic word-of-mouth*, *word-of mouse*, *viral marketing*, and *buzz*. Describing the history of the term *viral marketing*, Petrescu et al. (2011) cite the early work by Jurvetson and Draper (1997), who are considered to have first coined the term. They used the term to describe a promotional email for Hotmail’s free email service, which was included at the bottom of every email sent from the server. They argued that the term led to a viral attraction of new users (Petrescu et al. 2011). More recent literature, such as work by Akar and Topcu (2011), tends to describe *viral marketing* as the use of different tools including blogs, SNS, and user-generated content to help disseminate information at a rapid pace.

Characteristics and Benefits of Viral Videos

Scholars have identified a variety of characteristics to indicate a video’s virality. One such characteristic is the rapid pace of dissemination. Videos that go viral on SNS

typically do so quickly – amassing massive view counts in hours or days. However, with so much video content, and the immediacy of video sharing, the trending viral video of the moment is always changing (Broxton et al. 2011). For example, citing a study on new media versus old media published in *Journalisms* (2010), Broxton et al. discuss the impermanence of viral video popularity, noting only

5% of the top five stories on Twitter remained among the top stories in the following week... in the mainstream press, on the other hand, 50% of the top five stories remained a top story a week later. [Further], spotting those viral stories and trends early on has value, both in conferring status on the people who first shared them and in providing monetization opportunity for the networks on which they are shared (Broxton et al. 2011).

Broxton et al. describe two main benefits to viralness: opportunity for monetization and dissemination of political thought (Broxton et al. 2011). In terms of influencing social or political thought, Broxton et al. use the example of the 2008 US Presidential Election, when a combined 900 videos were posted to YouTube from the Obama and McCain campaigns, and American recording artist and producer Will.i.am's "Yes we can" video went viral once uploaded to YouTube in February 2008 (Broxton et al. 2011). Presently, in 2013, the video has now been viewed nearly 25 million times, and is an example of the immense reach a viral video can potentially have.

Causes of Video Virality: Trends

A variety of scholars have explored the phenomenon of virality in the hope of understanding what makes a video go viral. Cheng et al (2007), for instance, discuss how viral YouTube videos differ from traditional media, emphasizing video length, content, and lifespan. They highlight YouTube's social networking functionalities, which allow users to literally 'like' the videos, link them to others and 'favourite' them, ultimately increasing video popularity. Linking to other websites is a significant factor in what makes a video go viral. For example, a study conducted by Cha et al. (2007) indicated that 47% of all YouTube videos had incoming links from external sites, and the combined views of these linked videos accounted for 90% of the total views, thus suggesting that popular videos are more likely to be linked. It is clear that sharability is an important factor in the success of a viral video. However, Broxton et al. (2011) argue that not all highly shared videos generate a large number of views but do typically generate more views over a short period of time than less shared videos.

In *YouTube and Social Movements: A Phenomenological Analysis of Participation, Events and Cyberplace*, David Meek looks at how Web 2.0, particularly YouTube, is contributing to a new form of online social activism. Meek focuses on the not-for-profit organization Invisible Children, and their infamous Kony 2012 viral video as a site for his research. This article focuses on social movements as they relate to virality. Meek outlines the key literature around social movements and the

increasing incorporation of technology to increase awareness. He asserts that the Internet allows for new forms of participation, creates collective “events”, and connects people to create a network for solidarity and resistance. Meek uses Wellman’s (2001) idea of cyberplace to conceptualize his article, suggesting that “place and cyberplace form a continuum upon which filmed events can be located” (Meek, 2012).

Online Commenting: Reduced Social Cues

A variety of factors affect how individuals interact and communicate through mediated communication technologies. For example, it is important to note the reduction in social cues in these technologies. Early research into reduced social cues was influenced by the introduction of the Social Presence Theory in 1976 by Short, Williams, and Christie. These scholars focused on the overall impact of different levels of “social cues” during mediated synchronous communication. “Social cues”, according to Martin Tannis and Tom Postmes (2003), are verbal or non-verbal communication indicators that help to individuate a person, and provide a richer impression of that individual through mediated communication. The presence of social cues in mediated communication is thought to reduce ambiguity in message reception, or decoding (Tannis and Postmes, 2003). In their work on the Social Presence Theory, Short, Williams, and Christie regarded social presence as the degree of salience and perceived intimacy in the interaction (Baym, 2010). Later scholars defined social presence differently. Baym (2010) described social presence,

emphasizing how interactants perceive one another and how these perceptions were affected by nonverbal cues, including facial expression, posture, and gaze. These nonverbal cues serve important communicative functions in body-to-body communication (e.g. Wieman and Napp, 1975). The lack of these cues in mediated communication impacts clarity of message and successful message reception and decoding (Baym, 2010). This is particularly relevant to communication platforms like YouTube's comments section. For example, the reduction of social cues in an environment like YouTube can contribute to accelerated and heightened emotions, and an increase in inter-user conflicts. While some users help to mitigate these conflicts by using emoticons, capitalization, and punctuation like exclamation marks, comments can still often be misinterpreted.

Scholars who have studied communication with cues filtered out note that messages are harder to coordinate, and interactants gain greater anonymity as communication is depersonalized with gender, race, status and other features not immediately apparent. These scholars have also argued that mediated environments that lack social cues typically lack social norms to guide behaviour, resulting in an 'anything goes' environment (Baym, 2010). Additionally, they argue that these environments were likely to encourage negatively loaded emotional communication (Baym, 2010).

Online Commenting: Anonymity

Another important factor, in addition to reduced social cues is the anonymity of mediated communication environments. Historically, traditional feedback forums such as those in journalism (i.e. Letters to the Editor) were heavily managed. Only selective, often edited, reader feedback was published. With the introduction of online feedback capabilities such as the comments sections on blogs, news websites, or social media platforms, websites are becoming much less managed (Reader, 2012). Some online commenting forums are regulated collectively by commenters themselves. For example, in their study, Kaigo and Watanabe (2007) found that comments that were categorically immoral were often denounced and opposed by other commenters. Kaigo and Watanabe described this phenomenon as one whereby “the user community functioned pro-socially in an uncontrolled, anonymous Internet forum” (Reader, 2012, p. 496). Reader noted that ‘anonymity’ in mediated environments can mean different things, “from the lack of visual identities (the proverbial name without a face), to the adoption of alternate personae via online pseudonyms and avatars, to the expression of ideas without any identifying information at all” (Reader, 2012, p. 496). Other scholars have noted that the anonymity of online environments can make people feel comfortable discussing controversial issues, or making inappropriate comments that would not be socially acceptable in face-to-face communication environments (Herring et al., 2002). Some scholars have also noted that the anonymity of online communication environments make them attractive to minority individuals seeking group support, such as

members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, and members of minority social or political groups such as racial minorities and feminists (Herring et al., 2002).

Online Commenting: Flaming and Trolling

While the anonymity of online communication clearly has positive benefits for some individuals, many scholars have also discussed the negative effects, specifically two kinds of online commenting: flaming and trolling.

Flaming was defined by Walther et al. (1994) as hostile behaviour between internet users that includes messages with profanity, name calling, with intended negative effect (Baym, 2010). Baym (2010, p. 58) notes that “these messages occur predictably in online group interactions and often lead to ‘flame wars’ in which flames are met with hostile retorts. These hostilities escalate, drawing in more participants.” Joanne Yates and Wanda J. Orlikowski (1992) describe a variety of behaviours that qualify as flaming, including emotional outbursts, name-calling, inappropriate innuendos, sarcasm, and obscene language. Some scholars attribute this frequent hostility to a lack of social presence, accountability, and the reduced social cues in online communication environments (Baym, 2010). Other scholars suggest that flaming occurs not because a lack of norms, but *because* of norms.

Individuals tend to mimic each other’s behaviour, whereby groups with argumentative communication styles encourage this form of communication, while

more civil communication styles encourage more courteous behaviour (Baym, 2010).

While flaming involves intentional insults to provoke other users, trolling involves intentionally drawing other users into pointless time-consuming discussions. A common example of an internet troll, for instance, would be a user who posts an intentionally incorrect but not overtly controversial message with the goal of drawing in naïve or vulnerable users (Herring et al., 2002).

Rhetoric in Persuasive Videos

Scholars have described the different ways rhetoric has been used in persuasive YouTube videos. For example, in *YouTube-ification of Political Talk: An Examination of Persuasion Appeals in Viral Video*, Kristin English, Kaye D. Sweetser, and Monica Ancu focused on how different rhetorical persuasive appeals are used in political videos on YouTube. While Petrescu and Korgaonkar focus on defining viral marketing in their article, English et al. look deeper at how viral videos are used for persuasion, particularly in politics. The article emphasizes the use of ethos, logos, and pathos in campaign videos from the presidential candidates of the 2008 United States presidential election. The authors conducted a study exposing participants to a variety of YouTube videos from the respective candidates' campaigns that use different rhetorical appeals. The authors assert that the appeal that resonated the most with viewers was ethos. Ultimately, ethos was both the most credible and

persuasive appeal. Another scholar, Scott H. Church, also acknowledges the increasing significance of YouTube in the political process, noting that it is emerging as a credible outlet of political discourse (Church, 2010).

Methodology

In this section I will outline how I conducted my research, particularly my analysis of my research site, a YouTube video titled *It's Time*. The video was released on November 24 2011 by Australian grassroots community advocacy organization, *Get Up!*, and quickly gained momentum on social networks and in the press. As of June 2013 the video has amassed over 8.1 million views, received nearly 100 thousand likes, five thousand dislikes, and almost fifty thousand viewer comments. This data suggests the video has a powerful attraction, and the comments specifically can be used as a measure of which particular aspects of the video were most effective or persuasive.

About YouTube

Founded in 2005 by a group of former employees of the online commerce website *PayPal*, *YouTube* aimed to enable the widespread easy sharing of video online (Burgess & Green, 2009). 2005 saw the launch of a then relatively simple interface, with a variety of technological affordances that allowed internet users to upload, publish, and view video content, and link this content to other users through the use of URLs – all with relatively few technological constraints or built-in site limitations (Burgess & Green, 2009). When launched, *YouTube* had few distinguishing features to set it apart from other video streaming websites. However, with a 1.6 billion

dollar acquisition from *Google* in 2006, *YouTube* began to take the forefront. By 2008, the site consistently ranked in the top 10 most visited websites globally (Burgess & Green, 2009). One of the sites co-founders, Jawed Karim, described four key features that led to YouTube's success: "video recommendations via the 'related videos' list, an email link to enable video sharing, comments (and other social networking functionality), and an embeddable video player" (Burgess & Green, 2009).

One of important aspects of *YouTube* as a platform is its function as a site of participatory culture. A 'participatory culture' is defined as a culture where "fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content" (Jenkins, 2006). Livingstone (2003) noted the significance of participatory culture technologies in youth identity development: "while to adults the Internet primarily means the world wide web, for children it means email, chat, games.... In terms of personal development, identity, expression and their social consequences— participation, social capital, civic culture, these are the activities that serve to network today's younger generation" (Livingstone, 2003, p. 14).

Shifman (2011) also supports the notion of *YouTube* as a site of participatory culture, describing it as a central hub of user generated bottom-up video content. Moreover, the site's slogan 'Broadcast Yourself' reinforces the notion of the site as a platform for self-expression and participation (Shifman 2011). However, some

scholars have been more critical of the site's participatory culture functionality. *YouTube* is used and experienced by users in a number of different ways. While it does allow for the publishing of user-generated amateur content, the site also functions as a platform for users to engage with popular culture content, ranging from music videos, television shows, and film clips (Burgess and Green 2009).

It's Time

On November 24, 2011, non-profit, independent social advocacy group *Get Up! Action for Australia* released a video in support of marriage equality in Australia. The video, entitled *It's Time*, was released to much critical acclaim and media coverage. The video reached 2.5 million views in one week, and today has nearly 8 million views. The video depicts the story of a couple, showing all the major milestones in their relationship from the first time they met, to experiencing loss together, meeting each other's families, to eventual engagement. The video is shot from an angle that only allows the spectators to see one-half of the couple, one man. The other partner is left off screen, as if the unseen partner was in the place of the camera itself. To achieve this effect the partner on screen is seen interacting with what should have been a camera – reaching out to it while lying on the beach, opening the door for it in a taxi, and even arguing with it while on a road trip. Louis Althusser (1971) described the process of interpellation whereby a viewer or subject becomes the intended target of a message by recognizing oneself within that message (Woodward 42). While watching the *It's Time* video, spectators are to some

extent interpellated into subject positions, unconsciously becoming the other partner and identifying with the relationship on screen (Althusser, 1971). At the end of the two-minute-long video the unseen partner is finally revealed during a climactic engagement scene. As the camera pans out to show the couple together, it is revealed that the unseen partner is a man, and that the video told the story of a gay relationship all along. This reveal may shock viewers who had been identifying with the relationship throughout the video through this process of interpellation, particularly those viewers who may have had preconceived notions of what a same-sex relationship looks like. Ultimately the video is communicating a message that love is love, regardless of sex. The video concludes with the words “It’s time. End marriage discrimination.” and the link to GetUp’s website along with the organization’s logo.

Method of Analysis

I approached my research with the goal of deconstructing *It’s Time* to identify prominent rhetorical appeals in the video, in order to shed some light on what makes a cause-related YouTube video go viral. The first part to my research involved analyzing the video itself for themes, content, and examples of rhetorical appeals. Given that YouTube videos have built-in functionalities that allow for an indication of audience approval (‘like’ or ‘dislike’ button), allow for direct audience feedback (comments), and allow some regulation of the video comments (‘report’ and ‘mark as spam’ features), I thought it was also important to analyze viewer

responses. Therefore the second part to my research involved analyzing a selection of public viewer comments left on the video.

I aimed to connect the specific examples of rhetorical appeals that I found present in the video with viewer responses in hopes of gaining insight into what particular aspects of the video resonated most with audiences. For instance, comments might suggest that emotional appeals (pathos) resonated most with audiences, or comments might question the authority of the organization behind the video, *Get Up!*, (ethos), or comments might support the cause with logic, evidence and statistics (logos).

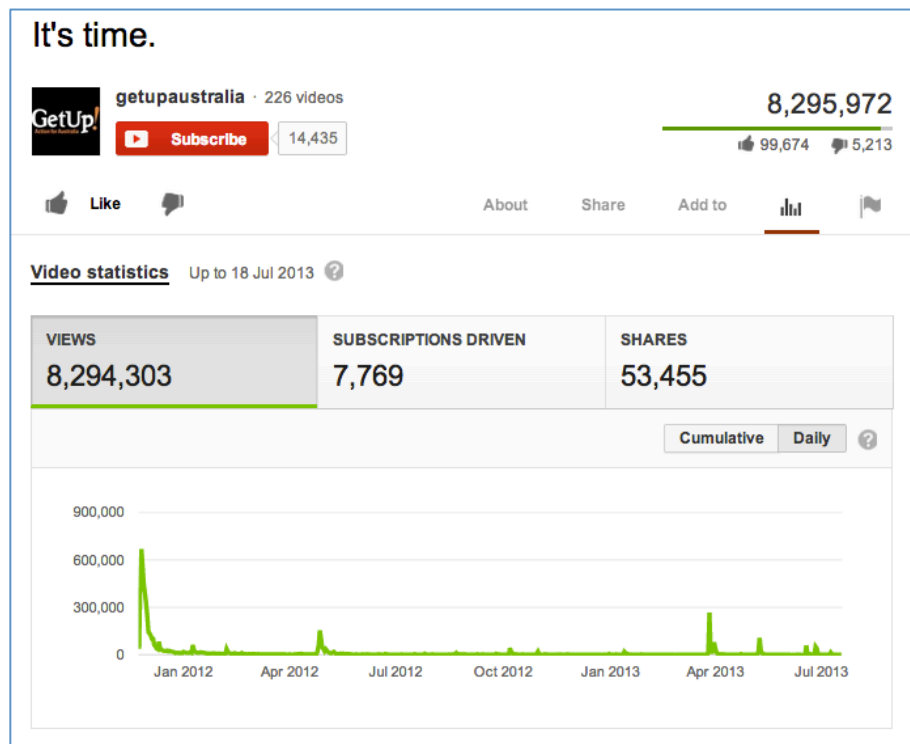
Data Collection and Coding System

Using a grounded theory framework, I developed a coding system to analyze the video and comments. To do so I used an open coding system to allow for an unrestricted coding of the data. I did have some initial ideas of words or themes I might look for when coding. These included comments that:

- Affirm that the user signed the petition
- Link to an outside source
- Use negative language
- Use positive language
- Share personal stories

For the scope of this project, I collected a comment stream of 100 comments from the month of April 2013, allowing me to get a sense of recent reactions to the video (see Figure 1). Comments from this month were selected as a result of a significant spike in comments during this time, which is demonstrated in the video's analytics graph

Figure 1: Video Statistics



However, it is important to note that the size of my data set compared with the total number of video comments limited my ability to make any broad conclusions.

To analyze the video itself, I conducted a content analysis and again used an open source coding system to identify tropes or trends within the video to help me answer my research questions (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Codebook

Code	Description	Quantity
EMOT	Comments that discuss emotion	14
HUM	Comments that utilize humour	12
PROF	Comments that use words generally considered profanity	6
STER	Comments that reinforce stereotypes	1
TROL	Comments that can be classified as trolling	8
FLAM	Comments that can be classified as flaming	1
LOG	Comments that make appeals to logos	3
LEG	Comments that discuss legislation or politics	4
RAC	Comments that communicate racist messages	4
REL	Comments that discuss religion	4
PROM	Comments that are self-promoting	1
HIST	Comments that make historical references	2
STY	Comments that discuss stylistic elements of the video (i.e. acting, cinematic style, music)	9
IUC	Comments that demonstrate inter-user-conflict	33
IUA	Comments that demonstrate inter-user-agreement	2

Analysis

Rhetorical analysis of video content

There are various persuasive and stylistic techniques that are used that make this video successful, including strong pathos appeals. The video begins with that first meeting; that first smile, the spark where it all begins. The on-screen character is shown smiling and laughing on a ferry as he meets the off-screen character, jotting down his name and phone number in the off-screen character's book (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: First meet



The video connects to its primary intended audience, Australians, by featuring quintessential Australian iconography. The couple are seen on what is likely their first date at Luna Park amusement park, a staple tourist attraction located in the Sydney Harbour. The video shows glimpses of the famous Luna Park Face, a large entranceway in the shape of a clown's face (see Figure 4). The couple are seen riding the iconic ferris wheel, a classically romantic activity. By showing the couple in

recognizably Australian locations, the video is able to draw an emotional connection with Australians, who may imagine the couple could be just like them and their significant other. Conversely, by including quintessential Australian iconography, the video is able to connect to more international audiences, who recognize that this video is representing Australia.

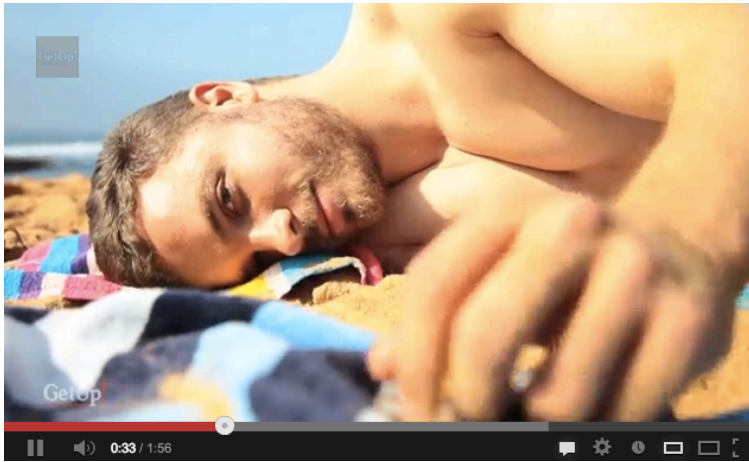
Figure 4: Luna Park Face



The video takes the audience through the various emotional milestones of a relationship, making strong persuasive appeals to pathos. The video takes the audience through the couple's early dating phase, showing them out on a date at night, as the on-screen partner holds open the car door for the off-screen partner. Later they are shown grocery shopping together, holding the grocery basket together. More Australian iconography is featured as they are shown at the beach with friends, playing cricket and laying in the sun. The on-screen partner is shown

gazing into the camera, reaching out his hand to touch the off-screen partner. (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: At the beach



The couple has their first emotional breakdown when they break into a fight on while on a roadtrip to meet the on-screen partner's parents. Once they arrive at the parents house, the on-screen partner is shown walking up front steps to the door, looking back supportively at his partner, a look of reassurance, almost communicating "it's okay, come up the stairs" (see Figure 6). The universal emotional milestone of meeting the family is another strong appeal to pathos. It is one of the moments that really help to communicate the overall message of the video, that love is love, that regardless of sexual orientation we all experience the ups and downs and milestones of relationships.

Figure 6: Reassurance

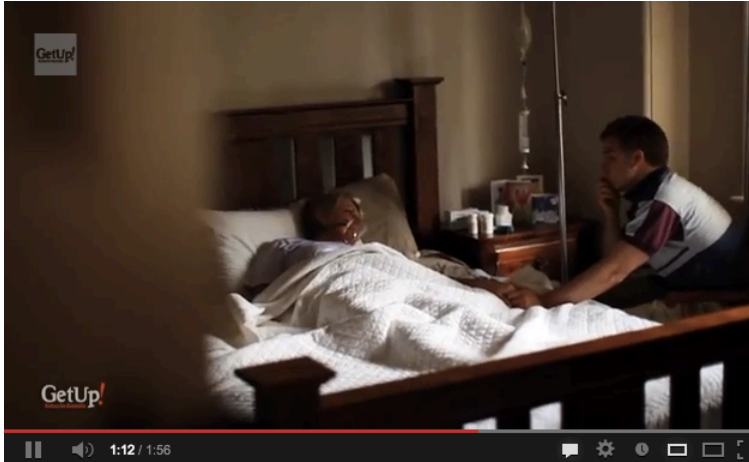


Later the couple are shown moving in together, the camera pans across the front yard showing a white picket fence and tree-lined street. Once moved in, they are shown enjoying simple domestic activities: the laundry blowing in the wind hung up outside, the on-screen partner doing the dishes after a meal, and later watching a movie with popcorn together.

The couple is later tested, when the on-screen partner's mother is sick. The video shows him sitting with her bedside, as she is hooked up to a breathing respirator (see Figure 7). The off-screen couple comes in to comfort the on-screen partner, placing his hand on his shoulder. The on-screen partner is shown breaking down with emotion, crying in the bathroom, hiding his tearful face from the off-screen partner. This moment again makes a strong appeal to pathos. It reminds the audience that regardless of sexual orientation we all experience loss, and like any

couple, a same sex couple are there for one another and support each other throughout a difficult time like the loss of a loved one.

Figure 7: Hardship



The video's conclusion happens as the couple is shown at a birthday party with their friends and family. The on-screen partner calls the off-screen partner out onto the grass off the porch in the backyard, where he gets down on one knee and pulls out a ring box (see Figure 8). The camera finally pans back to show both *male* partners, as the proposal happens (see Figure 9). The music cuts out to reveal the loud cheering of the excited family members and friends rushing to hug and congratulate the couple, and the emotional reaction of the partners.

Figure 8: Proposal



Figure 9: Partner revealed



The video is filled with many emotionally charged moments that make strong emotional appeals to pathos. The video makes a clear effort to demonstrate that gay couples go through the same ups and downs, emotional highs and lows, and experience the same milestones that any other couple does. This is an example of the overlap between appeals to Pathos and Logos, as the video makes strong emotional appeals, but also communicates the logical notion that same-sex couples

are just like any other couple, and deserve the right to enjoy the same privilege of being legally married.

Grounded theory analysis of video comments

Through a grounded theory analysis and open source coding system, I analyzed a selection of comments from a period of high viewer commenting activity, in April 2013. A variety of trends emerged as a result of the coding and comment analysis.

Theme: Expressed emotional support

Notably, many users expressed an emotional response to viewing the video. 14 comments were coded as an emotional response. These comments ranged from discussions of love, to expressions of physical emotional responses (i.e. crying), to simple use of emoticons to communicate emotions such as happiness or tears. In seven of the fourteen comments that were coded as “EMOT” users made specific mentions of crying. For example, alluding that they likely support the video’s cause, one user wrote “The only way this made me uncomfortable was making me cry my eyes out. Even then, I feel better having done it.” Another user echoed these sentiments, writing “WAY too early in the morning to get teary eyed at work”. YouTube’s built in functionalities that allow users to like comments offer even greater insight into viewer reactions. For example, another user mentions crying in her comment, which received 50 likes from other users (see Figure 10):

Figure 10: User Comment 1



Several users utilized emoticons to communicate their emotional responses to the video (see Figure 11 and Figure 12). For example, two users include happy-tear emoticons with their comments:

Figure 11: User Comment 2

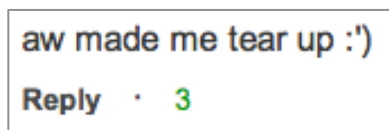


Figure 12: User Comment 3



All of these types of emotional responses validate the emotional appeals in the video, and are a measure of the video's successful rhetorical appeals to pathos.

In addition to comments that mention crying or tearing up, some users referenced other bodily responses to watching the video. For example, one user voiced her support for the video, claiming: "i [sic] got chills all through out [sic] my body. this [sic] is great!!!"

Two users referenced specific points in the video that particularly connected with them. For example, one user wrote: “the part at 0:48 really strikes me”. These comments are a measurable indication of aspects of the video that were successfully persuasive or effective. This user’s comment refers to the point in the video when the off-screen partner is introduced to the onscreen partner’s family (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: 0:48 Meeting the Family



With their comment, this user affirms that this specific moment in the video resonated with them. This milestone in the video’s plot contributes to the video’s emotional appeal. Through referencing a significant life event like introducing a partner to one’s family, the video makes a persuasive appeal to pathos – or emotion. This user’s comment suggests that such appeals are effective. Another instance where a user references a specific moment in the video includes the comment “Can’t blame them. I mean look at 1:40 those two bastards are fucking beautiful! (Full homo!)” The 1:40 mark is the point in the video plot when the on-screen partner

gets down on one knee to propose and the camera pans to show both male partners. (see Figure 14).

Figure 14: 1:40 The Proposal



This comment also plays with popular discourse by substituting the “no” in the popular phrase “no homo” to “full homo”. The phrase “no homo” has become part of popular vernacular, and is typically used after an individual acts or speaks in a way that may challenge gender norms or popular notions of sexuality. Urban Dictionary defines the term as a “Phrase used after one inadvertently says something that sounds gay.” The user’s clever play on the popular phrase helps to communicate their support for the video’s cause.

Nine commenters responded to stylistic elements of the video. For example, some comments discussed the cinematic style, while others commented on the video’s aesthetic and length. The comments were generally supportive in nature. One notable trend was users commenting that they had expected the outcome of the

video – that they knew the off-screen partner would turn out to be another man. For example, one user seems to have been underwhelmed by the video’s surprise conclusion, expressing that they “...saw that one coming from a mile away”. This must have been a popular reaction, as the comment received 134 likes, indicating that many other users may have also felt this way. Other comments echoed these sentiments. For example, one user wrote, “Nice vid but it was obvious what it was all about, I knew it was a guy from the beginning. Still beautifully made”, and another user wrote “Dunno why but I knew it will be a guy [*sic*]”. Another user humourously alluded that they also expected the outcome, commenting, “I knew those hands looked awfully [*sic*] large.” Notably, of the nine comments that were coded STY, in five comments the users claim they had expected the outcome of the video. In addition to comments about the off-screen partner surprise motif, two STY comments noted a similarity in the video’s aesthetic to that of a Google Glass advertisement. Another user commented on the length of the video, suggesting the video be shortened: “Cut this down to like 45 seconds”. While many comments expressed emotional support for the video’s cause, a significant percentage of the sample comments demonstrated inter-user conflict.

Theme: Inter-user conflict

The video brought about a lot of conflict between online commenters, which may have been a result of the controversial nature of the video’s theme, and the computer-mediate-communication (CMC) environment itself. For example, as

previously noted, scholars have asserted that anonymous communication environments like YouTube can make people feel comfortable discussing controversial issues, or making inappropriate comments that would not be socially acceptable in face-to-face communication environments (Herring et al., 2002). Notably, the majority of comments the followed the video, in my sample, were comprised of disagreements and conflict between comments. There was a broad range of disagreements, ranging from differing religious beliefs, political ideologies, and some trivial disagreements such as users pointing out errors in spelling. For instance, in response to a lengthy and emotionally heightened comment by one user, another user points out: "I'm pretty sure its [*sic*] Guerrilla warfare, not gorilla".

These inter-user disagreements often led to the use of emotionally heightened, aggressive statements, and use of profanity. Six users used profanity to communicate their disagreements. The use of profanity ranged in severity. Some users used profanity without directing it at another user or comment, others used profanity along with humour, and others directed profanity at another user or comment. In one case for instance, one user makes several aggressive, and emotionally heightened statements, directing profanity at and actively threatening another commenter.

Humor was often used by viewers supportive of the video's cause, as a means to communicate their disagreement with negative or oppositional comments. For example, users often used ironic or sarcastic statements to combat negative or

trolling comments. For example, in response to one-worded comments like “gay”, one user communicated the ironic statement: “yes people, its [*sic*] gay. Truly a stunning observation”. Another user used humor in a more confrontational way, in response to another user’s comment: “aw aren’t you cute! All opinionated! Too bad you’re a total bigoted retard, and you probably believe in a sky man who will send you to hell if you go near another man’s poop chute”

Theme: Trolling comments

Eight comments were coded as trolling comments. Trolling comments involve intentionally drawing other users into pointless time consuming discussions. The trolling comments from the sample were generally consistent in form – in that they usually involved obvious or common sense statements, such as “gayest video ever..”, “was kinda gay”, and “damn this video was gay”. In some cases, however, these statements can be interpreted humorously as ironic and witty. This may be the case with the latter comment, which received 123 likes. In some cases, these trolling comments were successful in drawing in more naive or vulnerable users.

Notably, several users directly called out other users, labeling them trolls, particularly during inter-user-conflict. For instance, one user responded to another user, “you are being little bit awkward with this same comment all over again, man up troll [*sic*]”.

Comments as an indication of support

I aimed to connect the specific examples of rhetorical appeals that I found present in the video with viewer responses in hopes of gaining insight into what particular aspects of the video resonated most with audiences. Notably, a significant number of comments expressed an emotional reaction to watching the video. 14 comments were coded as an emotional response, with comments indicating the viewer's support through expressions of love and even physical emotional reactions such as crying, and body chills. This is certainly an indication that the video had some success in persuading audiences to support the cause, and suggests that emotional appeals to pathos in the video may have resonated highly with audiences.

Discussion

I approached this research from the perspective of classical rhetoric, using Aristotle's persuasive strategies Ethos, Pathos, Logos to analyze the persuasive power of the video. I first established what video virality means, from a theoretical perspective, to set some context. It was important to also establish a basis for understanding patterns in online commenting. This included an overview of typical commenting behaviour, and the impact of reduced social cues and anonymity on commenting behaviour.

Strong appeals to pathos were made throughout the video, as the video featured many of the significant milestones of a relationship. The video also worked to build an emotional connection with Australians by featuring prominent Australian iconography. This helped make the video relatable to Australians by featuring landscapes, activities, and destinations that they may associate with home, such as the Luna Park amusement park in Sydney, and even through showing the couple on the beach playing cricket, a popular sport in Australia.

The video's persuasive appeal was strengthened through the featuring of strong emotional, relationship milestones and hardships throughout the video, such as a couple's first time moving in together, and a couple experience the loss of a loved one.

The video aims to persuade audiences to support marriage equality by demonstrating that a gay relationship is no different than any relationship – love is love. The video’s persuasive power is largely a result of including strong, emotional, relatable moments throughout the video, and adding the element of surprise – and in some cases shock – by the unveiling of the off-screen male partner at the end of the video. The video is not only persuasive because it features a visible, committed gay couple, but because it shows a committed gay couple that is loved, supported, and accepted by their friends and family. This is best captured in the final scene, when the couple’s friends and family rush to hug and congratulate them after the on-screen partner proposes.

By tapping into the strong emotional subject matter of family, the video really connects with audiences on an emotional level, making strong appeals to pathos. The amount of heightened emotional comments left on the video is a representation, to some extent, of the emotional connection audiences have with the video. For example, 14 comments in the sample expressed emotional reactions, and two comments cited specific emotional moments in the video that particularly resonated with them. There was also a significant trend amongst the comments in the sample: inter-user conflict. This type of commenting is common on CMC platforms like YouTube, especially on videos of a controversial nature. However, this trend may be an indication of a strong emotional connection with the video, and cause, amongst viewers.

Implications and Future Research

While the rhetorical analysis of the video, and the textual analysis of the user comments provided interesting insight into what persuasive techniques are successful in cause-related videos like *It's Time*, it is important to note some limitations. For the scope of this paper, a non-representational sample of user comments was used, and therefore the assertions and conclusions made in this paper are to some extent limited by the sample.

Future research opportunities would include conducting a larger-scale study that surveys a larger representational sample. There is also an opportunity for further research that incorporates viewer surveys to gain insight into general responses to the video and its persuasive appeals. This would provide more diverse measurable data with which to get an indication of the videos overall persuasive power, or success.

Conclusion

This paper was written with two key aims. First it aimed to understand the persuasive power of *It's Time* through an analysis of the persuasive appeals utilized in the video. Secondly, it aimed to understand the virality and success of the video, as demonstrated through the video views and comments.

Two research questions were established to guide the research: RQ1: How are persuasive appeals used in the YouTube video *It's Time*; and RQ2: What do the sample viewer comments suggest in terms of the video's success in persuading audiences to support marriage equality.

The video's most prominent mode of persuasion – appeals to pathos, were prominent throughout the video. There were also logical appeals made to logos together with emotional appeals. The findings from the comment analysis revealed that the emotional appeals to pathos were most effective in garnering support and resonating with audiences. While the strong emotional appeals throughout the video contributed to the persuasive power of *It's Time*, the style of communication common to the CMC environment itself, and the controversial nature of the topic, also contributed to heightened emotional responses. While there was a trend in expressed emotional support amongst the sample comments, there was also a significant number of comments that demonstrated inter-user conflict. This conflict was often the result of a trolling or flaming comment that was aggressively

countered by supporters of the video's cause. In some cases humour and profanity were used to communicate disagreements. In many cases humour was used to respond to trolling or overly negative comments.

The social significance of YouTube will be more clearly understood with time. What is clear, however, is that YouTube videos have become a critical tool in garnering support for a variety of social causes. With the advent of social networking sites and user-generated content that allows for both content sharing and feedback, videos like *It's Time* are capable of accomplishing unimaginable feats.

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