

EMOTIONS – DRIVERS OF ONLINE VIRALITY CONTENT CHARACTERISTICS OF VIRAL BLOG ARTICLES IN ROMANIA

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Abstract. *This paper offers insights into how online virality is shaped through emotions. It focuses on the analysis of 27 most viral blog articles published during week 23-32 of 2014, according to ZeList, an online media monitoring agency in Romania. The results showed that negative emotions are more used by content creators in driving virality which might be due to a country specific pessimism. However, the analysis revealed that it is in fact high arousal emotions which are most viral. Furthermore, interesting insights appeared with regards to the structure of emotions in a text. The content analysis of the articles revealed a certain structure in most of the viral articles: positive + negative + positive or negative + positive either at the sentence or article level.*

Keywords: *virality; emotions; blog articles; content analysis; Romania.*

Introduction

The way people consume content and the way they produced it has fundamentally changed with the arrival of the internet. Online articles thrive on the number of their readers. In the digital age, information travels extremely fast through email or social platforms. While it is widely accepted that social networks help the dissemination of information (Levin & Cross, 2004), new technologies and the internet are considered to having enhanced the role of these networks in information sharing, knowledge transfer, search, marketing and social news (Lerman & Ghosh, 2010).

Determining the level of virality of an online article before being published can therefore have implications on areas such as content marketing, advertising, public relations, exclusivities, sales, trends forecasts or management reputation (Ahmed, Spagna, Huici & Niccolini, 2013). Hence, there are three interested actors: (1) the content creators, those who could increase their number of readers, (2) the advertisers, those who could consider better monetization strategies and (3) the readers, those who could better filter the relevant content (Tatar, Antoniadis, de Amorim & Fdida, 2012).

Extensive research has already proven that word of mouth influences attitudes and decision making and therefore information diffusion has a direct impact on brand favourability and eventually sales (Godes & Mayzlin, 2009). Nevertheless, few studies have focused on why content is being shared. Hence, this paper focuses solely on emotions that determine virality and the perspective of content creators because eventually, in the digital sphere everyone becomes content creator.

This paper makes several contributions by: (1) responding to the request of recent studies that highlighted the need for further research on text characteristics which drive virality, (2) it is highly important for content creators in order to design relevant campaigns; (3) it offers insights into the developing and promising online Romanian market. However, most importantly, it analyzes only the written content of the online viral articles, thus offering highly useful information for those who have a limited budget, as video or photo production is more expensive.

In order to better understand the context of this paper, namely the small but growing digital sphere in Romania, the following section will offer some background information.

Romanian online market

The Romanian online market is still developing and therefore, creating viral content is highly important for journalists, bloggers, marketers, advertisers and PR persons. The readers are highly receptive and engaged through comments, likes and shares on Facebook.

In terms of social networks, Romanians prefer using Facebook, with one third of the population having an account, and about four million being active users (Facebrands.ro, 2014). Twitter plays an important role in news dissemination around the world (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). However, this is not the case of Romania. Surprisingly, Twitter ranks fourth after Instagram and LinkedIn in number of active users on social networks with 71.400 accounts, out of which only 14.199 are active (Zelist, 2013).

Literature review

Previous research has already established the importance of word of mouth and chatter in driving sales (Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels, 2009). News always had an expiration date, but given the fact that nowadays news travel extremely fast, it became important not only to discover what is already viral, but to know what it is viral before being published or before being wide spread (Bandari, Asur & Huberman, 2012). One could better spread the news about a cause or a politician could make his/her perspective better known, or a brand could prevent an image crisis. Predicting article popularity before release is therefore extremely valuable to content creators, marketers and readers. This research adds to the body of literature by exploring more the relationship between content characteristics and more precisely emotions expressed in online articles and virality.

There are two main discussions when it comes to research on virality. On the one hand, there are those who have a top-down approach and consider that virality is the result of nodes or highly influential individuals (Hinz, Skiera, Barrot & Becker, 2011) and on the other hand, there are those who support bottom down approach, which state that virality relies rather in the characteristics of the message (Botha & Reyneke, 2013).

Van den Bulte and Yogesh (2007) took on Granovetter (1983) theory of social networks and identified three types of individuals when considering a strategy for virality on social networks. On the one hand, there are those who are hubs, or well connected individuals having the highest number of ties. At the other end there are those who are fringes, who have the least ties, or isolated individuals. In the middle there are the individuals named bridges who connect the hubs to the fringes.

Using this classification, Hinz et al. (2011) discussed information diffusion through social networks and identified several strategies. The first strategy was using hubs as a first stage for seeding, also called "high-degree seeding". Van den Bulte and Yogesh (2007) and Bakshy, Hofman, Mason and Watts (2012) claim that these individuals are the best ones to target as considering epidemiology spread, they are more likely to reach the highest number of nodes within the network.

Although influencers or hubs are extensively used in marketing practice, many researchers did not agree with the so called "influentials hypothesis" (Guerini, Strapparava & Özbal, 2011; Watts & Dodds, 2007). A strong argument against the hubs seeding would be the fact that the overload of messages which reach such individuals might hinder the process of virality by the simple fact that the individual would not have the time to process, filter and validate it in order to spread it further (Hinz et al., 2011). Watts and Dodds (2007) suggested that a critical mass of easily influenced individuals is more likely to lead to virality rather than well connected people. This is what Hinz et al. (2011) named "low degree seeding".

Departing from the low degree seeding strategy, Berger and Milkman (2012) proposed that the characteristics of the message might lead to virality. This is a bottom up virality perspective. However, they were not looking at all the characteristics. Their results pointed out that there is a relationship between emotions and virality. Emotional contagion via computer mediated systems was also supported by Kramer, Guillory and Hancock (2014) using the newsfeed of ($N = 689,003$) Facebook users.

Furthermore, although previous studies discussed rather content characteristics and readers perceptions of virality (Guerini et al., 2011), Google trends (2014) show that people are increasingly interested on “how to drive virality” over the last years. Figure 1 shows a growing trend on searches on Google for “viral content” between 2009 and 2014. The peaks feature articles such as “The 5 attributes of viral content” from Huffington Post. This shows that there is an interest for how to create content which is viral which could come from content creators themselves or marketers. It would be therefore highly interesting to study the perception and experience of these people regarding drivers of virality and more precisely emotions.

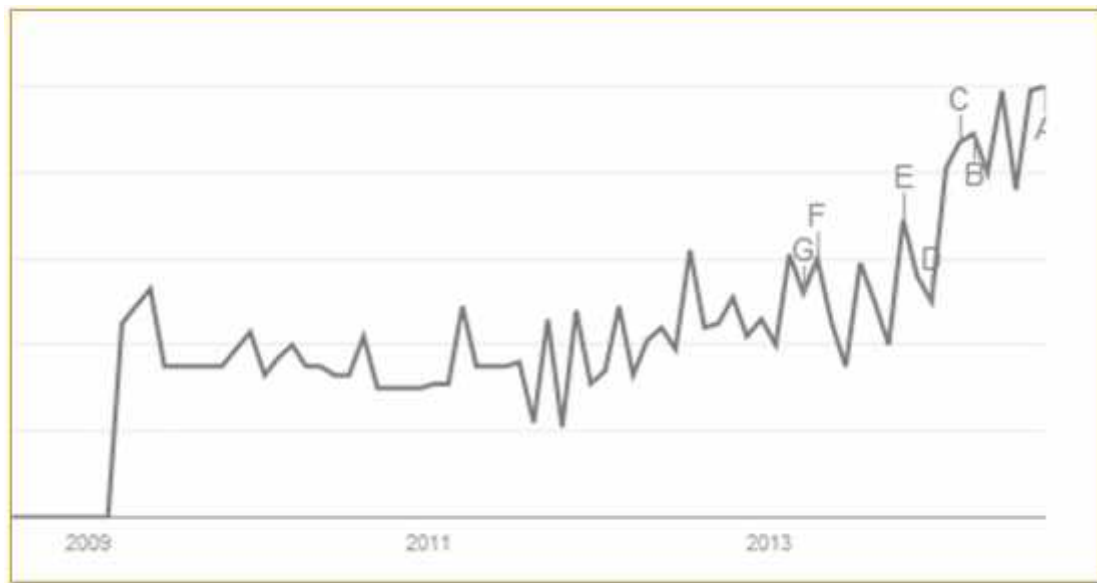


Figure 1. Google Trends (2014) “viral content” between 2009 and 2014, worldwide

- G - San Francisco Chronicle / BuzzFeed's New Self-Serve Ad Platform Gives Discounts Based On Virality
- F - San Francisco Chronicle / Unmetric Announces New Social Benchmarking Tool For Companies to Measure the Virality of Their Competitors' Video Campaigns on YouTube
- E - The Guardian/ How do you value and rank viral content
- D - San Francisco Chronicle/ Newest Digital Marketer Blog Post Examines Latest Virality Case Study
- C - Huffington Post / The 5 attributes of viral content
- B - Economic Times / How do you value and rank viral content
- A - Huffington Post /Can You Architect Virality? Absolutely. Here's How

Virality

Literature broadly defines virality as content spreading quickly from one member to the other, in a community (Guerini, Pepe & Lepri, 2012). Berger and Milkman (2012) looked at virality in terms of the number of times an article is emailed. Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013) analyzed number of retweets, defining thus virality in terms of “shares” on Twitter. Given the specificity of the Romanian market, this paper defines virality in terms of the numbers of online transmissions via Facebook, during a specific time.

Emotion contagiousness

Emotion contagiousness refers to emotional diffusion from one individual to another. According to a view of Hatfield, Paige & Rapson (2011, p.26) “people seem to be capable of mimicking others' facial, vocal, and postural expressions with stunning rapidity. As a consequence, they are able to feel themselves into those other emotional lives to a surprising extent”. Forgas (2006) highlighted that emotional affects are highly persuasive and can influence behavioral responses. The experiment done by Kramer et al (2014) on Facebook newsfeeds was the most recent and the largest of its kind proving that emotions can be transmitted through computer mediated platforms.

Table 1 presents a series of emotion classifications from different authors (Cambria, Livingstone, & Hussain, 2012). This study will take into consideration Plutchik (2001)'s classification because it offers the necessary insight for the subject matter. Furthermore, Kamvar and Harris (2011) built an emotional lexicon on Plutchik's (2001) categories which as explained in the coding section helps making better sense of online published text.

Table 1. Emotion classifications (adapted from Cambria et al., 2012, p.146)

Author	Number of emotions	Basic emotions
AUTHOR	6	anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, surprise
EKMAN	6	anger, fear, joy, love, sadness, surprise
PARROT	6	desire, happiness, interest, surprise, wonder, sorrow
FRIJDA	8	acceptance, anger, anticipation, disgust, joy, fear, sadness, surprise
PLUTCHIK	9	desire, happiness, interest, surprise, wonder, sorrow
TOMKINS	22	joy, anticipation, anger, disgust, sadness, surprise, fear, acceptance, shy, pride, appreciate, calmness, admire, contempt, love, happiness, exciting, regret, ease, discomfort, respect, like

Content characteristics

Early studies on online virality focused in fact on the first measurements of user activity, trying to predict long term virality (Szabo & Huberman, 2008; Lerman & Ghosh, 2010), for instance by looking at how many users accessed and ranked the article in the first minutes before being published.

The technical oriented researchers looked for url-s, keywords, hashtags and meta data which could enhance the visibility of online content both in social networks and in search (SEO). Nevertheless, this approach could at most convince other users to find and read the article, not to share it. Therefore, it should be the content which should determine the user to share it. In this sense, literature provides few examples as the field is still under researched.

A. Emotional Valence

Research revealed that emotional contagiousness makes people to discuss more about things (Forgas, 2006), thus, emotional content may have an influence on what is being shared. It is a layman belief that negative content spreads faster than positive content. Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) stated that a general principle in psychology is that bad things have more influence than good things, in a vast range of situations, hence the expression “if it bleeds, it leads”. Nevertheless, researchers called for further investigation of the matter (Godes & Mayzlin, 2009). And in fact, Berger and Milkman (2012) tested this theory and revealed that generally speaking positive content is more viral. But they defined virality in terms of articles shared privately to a friend in an individualistic society. It would be interesting to explore this also for articles shared on Facebook. Hence, the first research question: RQ1. Is positive online content used more often than negative online content in viral articles?

Furthermore, Hofstede (2001) argued that when it comes to Europe, there are a range of different cultures, each with its own specificities which should be taken into account. Thus it would be interesting to see the perspective of Romanian content creators.

B. Emotional Arousal

Both Botha and Reyneke (2013) and Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013) claim that there might also be something more than valence alone and suggest that research should be done also on level of emotion arousal or activation. Activation is known to trigger action. Therefore, more active emotions might lead to higher number of shares. But this also means that both negative and positive emotions can lead to virality as long as they are high arousal.

RQ2. Is high arousal online content used more often than low arousal online content in viral articles?

Methodology

This paper looks at text characteristics in order to determine what type of content can lead to viral articles hence providing useful information for bloggers who just started and would want to be noticed. This kind of information would also be useful for marketers who would want to get their message spread fast in online, or for other shareholders as mentioned above. Hence, this paper will do secondary data research on online viral blog articles in Romania.

Sampling

This paper will address viral blog articles in Romania. A study published in august 2014 regarding the blogosphere in Romania showed 39% of bloggers report having fewer than 1000 unique visitors per month (Cocioaba & Negrea, 2014). This was the largest group which self-reported their unique visitors from a study which surveyed 578 Romanian bloggers. 1000 shares means that at least 1000 unique viewers read the blog and also shared them to their Facebook network. Therefore, it would make sense to assume that those articles who entered top 10 weekly most viral articles published on refresh.ro during the summer months and have over 1000 shares, thus also over 1000 unique viewers represent a homogenous sample which can be considered viral.

Departing from the criteria presented in Table 2, namely articles with over 1000 Facebook shares identified in top 10 most viral blogs for each given week by ZeList and published on refresh.ro, 27 articles were found during the weeks 23- 32 of 2014, basically covering the month of June, July and the first week from the beginning of August. They were written by 17 different authors. The language used by all of them was Romanian. The articles had various lengths and discussed different topics, from parenting, healthcare, life, etc.

Table 2. Criteria for article selection

Criteria
Article in Top 10 ZeList published on Refresh.ro
Published during summer weeks
Number of Facebook shares > 1000

In order to achieve data triangulation, the number of Facebook shares was also calculated with a online free solution entitled advertica. Advertica (2014) offers differentiated results as presented in Figure 2.

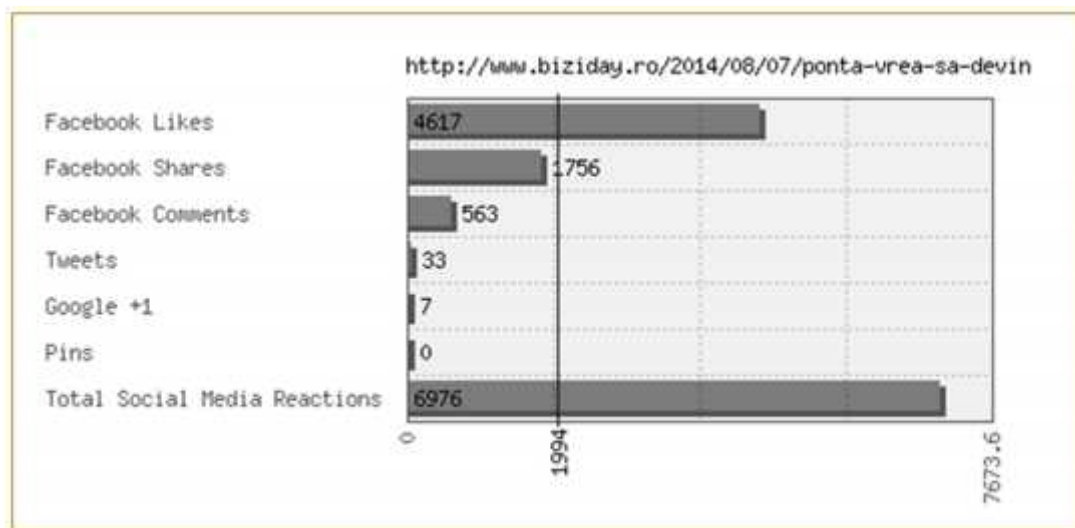


Figure 2. Advertica table showing the results of the number of shares of an article from the top 10 ZeList published on refresh.ro

The articles were distributed as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of viral articles for the weeks 23- 32 2014 in Romania

Week	Number of articles
Week 23	4
Week 24	4
Week 25	0
Week 26	7
Week 27	1
Week 28	1
Week 29	4
Week 30	0
Week 31	2
Week 32	4
Total	27 articles

Data collection

For the secondary data analysis, the data was already available and it was retrieved as presented in the sampling section. The analysis was conducted on the original text in order to ensure that very little insight is lost. Only the results were reported in English.

Methods of content analysis

For the analysis of the online articles previous literature was found and codes could be extracted easily from the theory of emotions.

Coding scheme

The research questions of this paper inquire on the role of emotions in driving virality by looking at the valence of emotions and their intensity or arousal.

Departing from Plutchick (2001)'s emotion wheel, Raouzaïou, Karpouzis and Kollias (2003) separated emotions in positive and negative but also in very active and very passive emotions. Hence, this paper used as codes the eight emotions identified by Plutchick (2001): anticipation, joy, acceptance, surprise (both in a negative and positive context), fear, sadness, disgust and anger. These were separated in positive and negative emotions as in Figure 6. Furthermore, they were separated according to Raouzaïou

et al. (2003) in high arousal emotions: anger, joy, surprise, fear, disgust and anticipation and low arousal emotions: sadness and acceptance. Table 4 shows the key codes.

Table 4. Table of codes for valence

Code	Code Level 1	Code Level 2
VALENCE (VA)	POSITIVE EMOTIONS (VA-POZ)	Anticipation (VA-POZ-AN)
		Joy (VA –POZ–JO)
		Acceptance (VA – POZ – ACC)
		Surprise (when a positive context) (VA-POZ-SU)
	NEGATIVE EMOTIONS (VA-NEG)	Fear (VA-NEG –FE)
		Sadness (VA –NEG –SA)
		Disgust (VA-NEG-DI)
		Anger (VA-NEG-ANG)
		Surprise (when a negative context) (VA-NEG-SU)

Emotional Lexicons

For the eight basic emotions identified by Plutchik (2001), indicators for sentiment analysis were needed. Kamvar and Harris (2011) built an emotional search engine in order to collect and identify the world's emotions as expressed online, Table 5. Their research led to a list of high frequency seed words for Plutchik's (2001) categories. They will aid making better sense of the content.

Table 5. Key Words, as identified by Kamvar and Harris (2011)

Emotions	Key Words, as identified by Kamvar and Harris (2011)
ANTICIPATION	Bored, nervous, sure, worried, excited, certain, calm, anxious, ready, inspired, hopeful, motivated, optimistic, prepared.
JOY	Better, good, happy, well, special, loved, great, safe, proud, nice, fine, best, wanted, complete, warm, super, alive, high, confident, happier, perfect, excited, relieved, content, beautiful, secure, lucky, blessed, awesome, wonderful, relaxed, liked, inspired, energetic, amazing, loving, glad, giddy, hopeful, accepted, satisfied, refreshed, honored, fortunate, fantastic, optimistic, grateful, fulfilled, incredible, peaceful.
FEAR	Guilty, nervous, helpless, scared, behind, worried, stressed, anxious, afraid, trapped, overwhelmed, tense, desperate, unprepared, queasy, uneasy, threatened, unsure.
SADNESS	Bad, guilty, sorry, sad, horrible, alone, lonely, depressed, terrible, lost, worse, wrong, empty, awful, hurt, dead, crappy, used, uncomfortable, useless, miserable, helpless, broken, shitty, jealous, confused, ashamed, weak, unloved, numb, ignored, drained, worst, hopeless, worthless, stuck, low, disappointed, violated, rejected, crushed, melancholy, incomplete, frustrated, unhappy, lousy, homesick, embarrassed, deprived, blue, hallow, abandoned, lacking, isolated, inadequate, defeated.
ANGER	Mean, used, uncomfortable, mad, upset, angry, jealous, fucked, pissed, annoyed, stuck, frustrated, screwed, bitter.
SURPRISE	Weird, hurt, different, awkward, strange, fucked, confused, odd, lucky, disappointed, overwhelmed, screwed, embarrassed.
DISGUST	Sick, horrible, terrible, wrong, bored, awful, fat, miserable, selfish, ugly, ashamed, pathetic, icky, worthless, gross, evil, disgusting, nauseous, yucky, nauseated, disgusted
ACCEPTANCE	The same, loved, safe, comfortable, dead, okay, lazy, complete, ok, relieved, numb, drained, hopeless, alright, content, secure, normal, beat, relaxed, loving, satisfied, fulfilled, peaceful, defeated.

Content analysis and findings

Content analysis

A problem occurred after applying the codes. Texts had various lengths. Therefore, comparing negative and positive codes in order to determine whether positive online content is used more often than negative online content in viral articles would not give an accurate picture. Longer text would have dictated the results of the study. A similar problem was encountered by Berger and Milkman (2012). However, given the larger sample, they could control for the length of the articles.

Hence, different possibilities were taken into considerations. Attributing the most prominent code to every text would reduce too much the information. At this point, as previous literature was not offering relevant advice, we reached out to the content creators. When discussing with them about the emotions in their most viral articles, they nominated a mix of emotions, both positive and negative.

Hence, two codes per article would still not offer the clear picture, because it would not say which one was used more often, they would cancel themselves out. Therefore, the compromise was to use the three most prominent codes per article, as in the shortest article only three emotions were identified.

The researcher was aware of the fact that this will reduce the material and some important aspects will be lost but this was the best solution in order to be able to respond properly to the research question.

Summary of findings

Finding 1: Negative content is used more often than positive content in viral articles in Romania

The content analysis showed that negative content is used more often than positive content in Romania (Figure 3) which answers RQ1. This is not in line with more recent research which says that positive content is more viral (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Libert & Tynski, 2013). However, these results might be due to a country specific cultural trait. The content creators stressed the negativity of the Romanians which is supported by previous research (Bibu & Brancu, 2008). Therefore, it might just be the case that in Romania, negative content is used more often in viral articles than positive content. Figure 4 shows the most used type of emotions in viral articles.

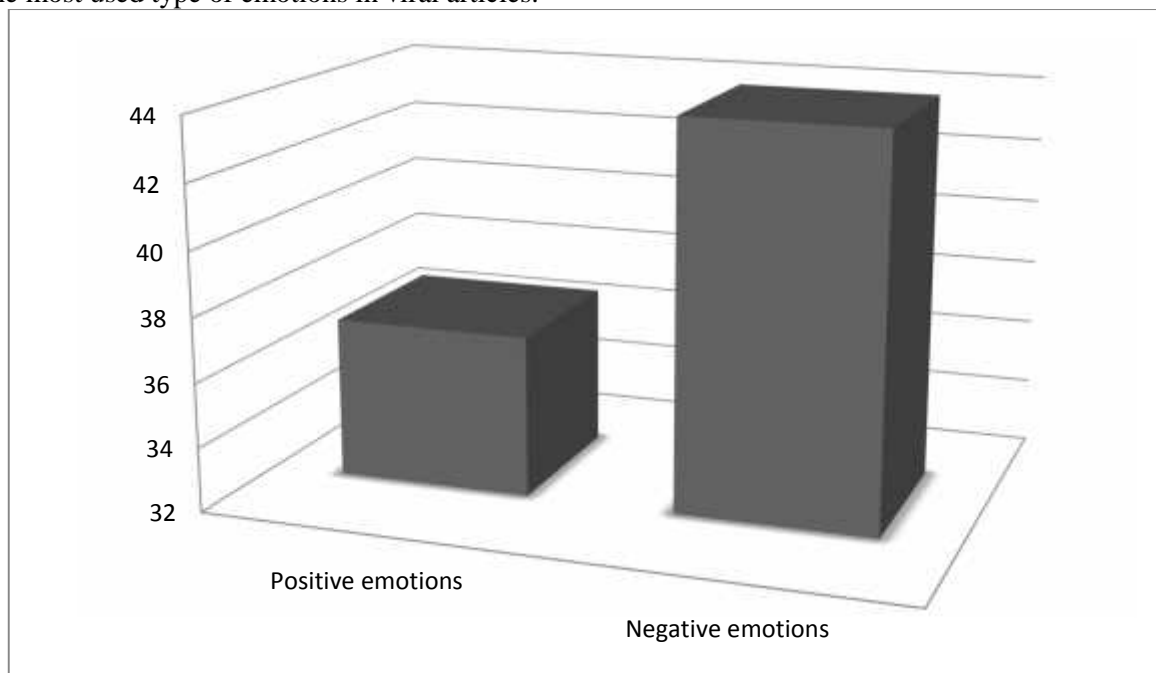


Figure 3. Most used type of emotions according to valence

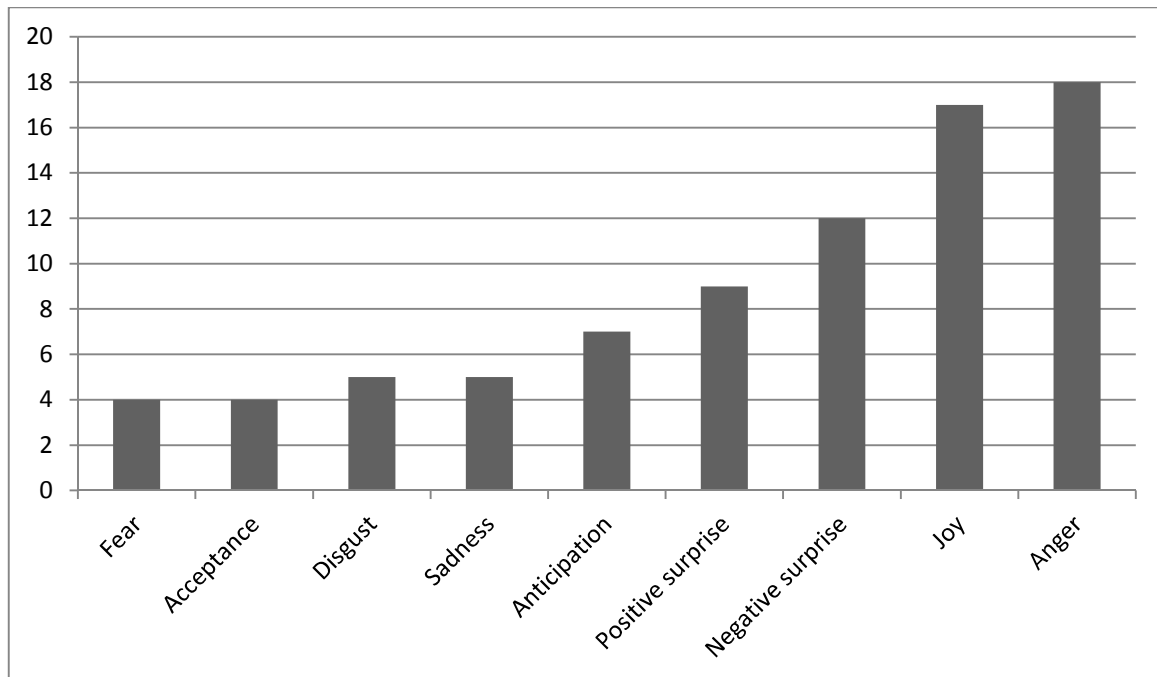


Figure 4. Emotions classified according to their appearance in viral articles

Finding 2: High arousal content used more often than low arousal content in Romania

However, as also previous literature found (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Henz, 2013), the content analysis pointed out that it is not valence alone that influences virality. The content analysis revealed that high arousal content is used more often than low arousal content in viral articles in Romania (Figure 5), which answers RQ2. Anger and joy were previously identified as high arousal emotions which trigger virality by Berger and Milkman (2012) and Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013). Hence, the intensity of emotions influences the virality of articles. Nevertheless, negative emotions continue to be the most viral in Romania, but with an accent on high arousal negative emotions.

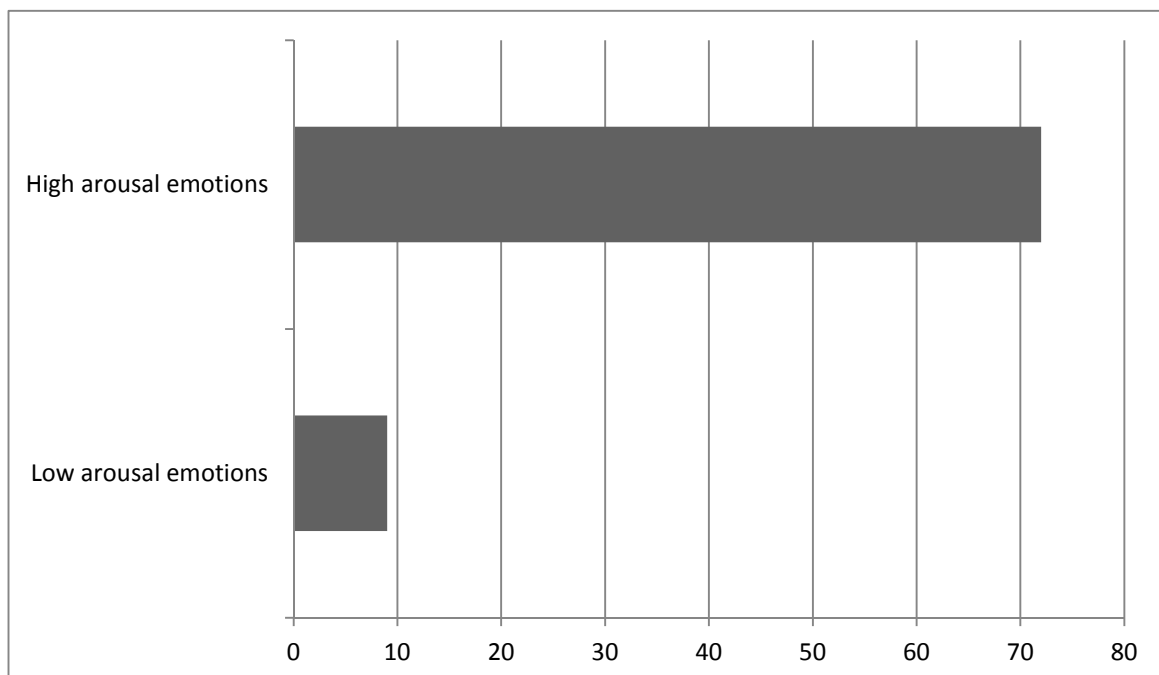


Figure 5. Most used type of emotions according to arousal

Finding 3: The structure of viral articles in Romania

Previous research focused on finding the emotion which triggers virality. "Emotions play a role in whether or not a message will go viral, but there are inconsistent findings regarding which emotions will

result in greater pass-along” Henke (2013, p.113). The originality of this paper resides in the fact that it didn’t look only for one emotion. An interesting aspect which came up as a result of text analysis is that virality does not rely on positive or negative content alone, but rather on a mixture of the two. Furthermore, it is also interesting that the structure consists of high arousal emotions, not of low arousal emotions. This was supported by the text analysis which found this structure: positive + negative + positive or a simplified version negative + positive at the level of the sentence or at the level of the entire articles. Figure 6 explains how most articles contained clusters of positive + negative emotions rather than negative emotion alone.

Related to structure, Libert and Tynski (2013) mention that an emotional roller coaster would trigger virality for video materials. By emotional roller coaster, the researchers mean that the video content should consist of high emotional parts and low emotional parts in order to keep the viewer alert. Teixeira (2012) states that according to the human psychology, we are likely to get bored after a while of experiencing a new feeling. But the researchers are referring to video content alone and it does not apply in the case of this paper. Nevertheless, it does imply that the solution for virality might consist of a mix of emotions and in this case of high arousal emotions.

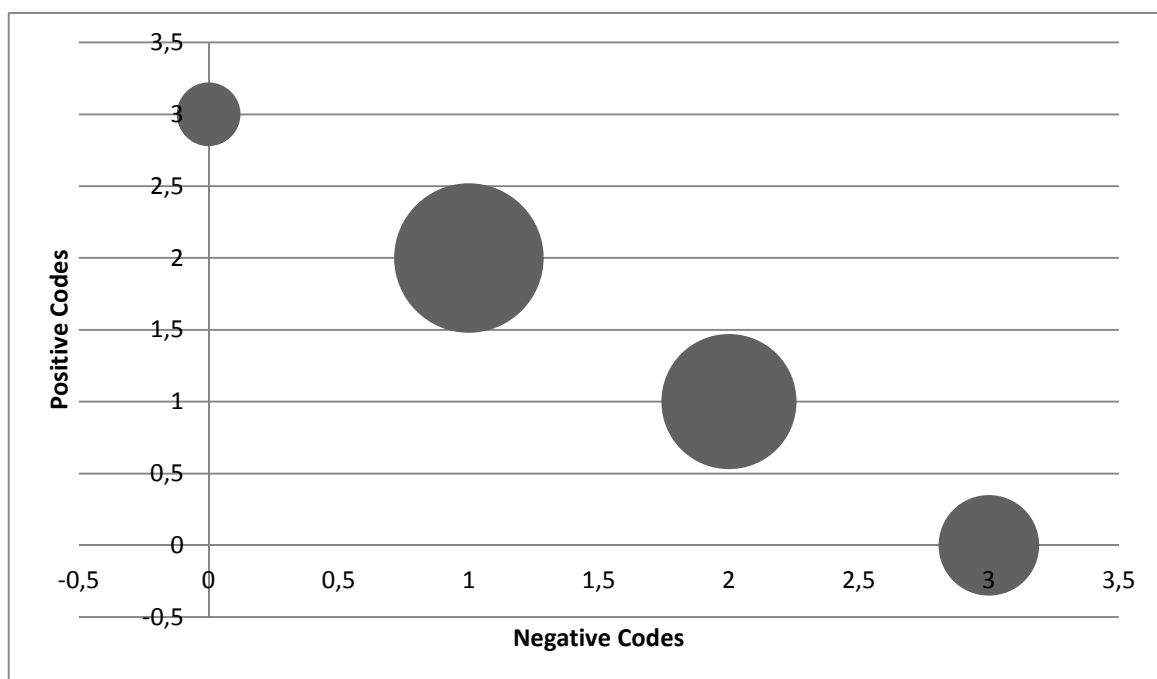


Figure 6. Clusters of articles

Conclusion & implications

This paper aimed to explore whether emotions are drivers of online virality in Romania. In order to do so, it looked at the content characteristics of the most viral blog articles within a given period of time. All the research questions have been answered.

This paper is highly important on the one hand for the literature as the field is underdeveloped. Previous literature has focused on online articles of mainstream media, videos or social networks, the originality of this research resides in the fact that it looks at articles on blogs. Secondly, virality is a subject highly important for marketers because it can help them to spread their message at a lower cost. Thirdly, the results of this paper are relevant for the bloggers themselves because, as it was pointed out in the beginning, Romania is a small, yet growing online market and now it is the perfect time for a blogger to establish himself/ herself as a viral outlet. The findings suggest that content creators should focus on emotions as a main factor of virality.

This paper puts a spotlight on the online Romanian market and shows that valence is important for viral bloggers. Moreover, in creating their viral articles, they use negative emotions, given the country pessimistic profile. Furthermore, the content creators also use high arousal emotions which have a stronger effect in driving virality compared to low arousal emotions. This was the insight of the analysis of their articles.

Thus content creators might be more interested in discussing negative subjects as they are considered as having a higher level of virality in Romania. This is an important implication for marketers who should know that Romanian bloggers might be keener to cover a subject from a negative perspective. Furthermore, the articles that will go viral will contain high arousal emotions. Negative, high arousal emotions associated with a brand can have disastrous results for marketers.

Nevertheless, when analyzing the structure of the emotions within an article, it was observed that most viral articles consist of a mix of emotions. The pattern found at sentence level or text level was positive + negative + positive or negative + positive. Hence, content creators who want to craft viral articles should not focus on a single emotion. This is also relevant for marketers who are interested to pitch stories to bloggers.

Further research & Limitations

Given the limited resources the analysis was conducted only by one coder. More coders could have brought more value. However, further research could be done by using automated emotional analysis, which could increase reliability (Young & Soroka, 2012), at least in the case of valence.

Moreover, emotional valence in relationship to virality should be studied in several contexts because the country specificity might play an important role (Hofstede, 2001). When it comes to intensity of arousal, this paper showed similar results with previous literature (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Furthermore, more research should be done on content creators' perspective regarding virality and on the strategies they use and hence being able to triangulate the data.

Lastly, with the current findings a viral model could be developed and tested quantitatively. Previous literature is limited when it comes to the emotional structure of viral online text content, discussing rather viral video ads Teixeira (2012). This paper opens thus new fields for further research when it comes to online text virality and emotions.

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