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6 Minute English

What makes a video go viral?



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NB: This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello. I'm Neil. Welcome to 6 Minute English, where we like to share...

Rob

Jokes, funny stories and cat videos...

Neil

No, Rob – we like to share six useful items of vocabulary.

Rob

Yes, that too. But first, check out this meme on my phone, Neil – Grumpy Cat – it's so cute! Shall I send it to you?

Neil

No, please don't! A **meme** is a picture or video with an amusing caption that a lot of people share with each other online. Well, in this programme we're talking about why some online content goes viral...

Rob

... and some doesn't. This cat is cute because it looks so **grumpy** – and that means 'bad tempered'

Neil

An image, video, or other piece of information **goes viral** when it gets passed on very quickly from person to person on the internet.

Rob

So first let's start with our quiz question, Neil. Can you tell me which was one of the first videos to go viral on the internet? Was it...

- a) Charlie Bit my Finger,
- b) Sneezing Panda or
- c) Dancing Baby?

Neil

I'm going to guess 'Sneezing Panda' – because I haven't seen any of those videos.

Rob

That's ridiculous Neil. Have you been living under a rock?

Neil

Look, I just don't find silly videos particularly cute – or funny.

Rob

OK, OK, no need to get grumpy about it. Let's move on. Why do so many people – Neil excluded – enjoy sharing content online? Let's listen to Dr Jonah Berger, Marketing Professor at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Contagious: Why things catch on*, talking about what motivates us to share.

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Dr Jonah Berger, Marketing Professor at the University of Pennsylvania and author

Humans are social animals. Sharing allows us (to) feel connected to others. We share emotions, which allow us to deepen the bonds we have with our peers and with our friends.

Neil

So it's all about being connected and deepening the bonds between ourselves and our peers. Our **peers** are people the same age as ourselves who share the same social position in a group.

Rob

And we particularly like to share content that makes us feel emotional. Let's hear more from Dr Jonah Berger about this.

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Dr Jonah Berger, Marketing Professor at the University of Pennsylvania and author

High arousal emotions include things like anger and anxiety, but also excitement and humour, low arousal – sadness and contentment. [It] turns out that those high-arousal emotions – those emotions that fire us up and cause us to take action – also drive us to share.

Neil

Arousal means 'to excite a particular feeling in somebody'. And emotions like anger and anxiety tend to cause stronger feelings than sadness and contentment.

Rob

Right – high-arousal emotions fire us up – and **to fire someone up** means ‘to make someone excited and enthusiastic about something’. So when a video we see on the internet makes us laugh – or makes us excited or angry – then we are more likely to share it with others.

Neil

And sharing that emotion with others strengthens the connection or bond between us. That's what Dr Berger's theory says anyway.

Rob

I'm surprised that sad things aren't passed on as much as, say, funny things.

Neil

Well, how often do you share sad videos with your peers?

Rob

Good point. I do tend to share content that makes me laugh – more than sad or angry stuff anyway. Like the Grumpy Cat meme. Can I show it to you now?

Neil

No.

Rob

OK. I'll just show you the caption. It says, "I purred once. It was terrible".

Neil

Yeah. Right. Hilarious, Rob. Now, can we have the answer to today's quiz question, please, if you've finished amusing yourself?

Rob

OK. OK. Which was one of the first videos to go viral on the internet? Was it... a) Charlie Bit my Finger, b) Sneezing Panda or c) Dancing Baby?

Neil

And I said 'Sneezing Panda'.

Rob

Well, it was actually Dancing Baby. This 3-dimensional animation of a baby dancing the cha-cha was one of the first viral videos released in the late 1990s. Another popular one was the Hamster Dance by Hampton the Hamster, which appeared in 1997.

Neil

Well, fascinating as all that sounds, shall we look back at the words we learned today, Rob?

Rob

Sure. The first item was 'meme' – a picture or video with an amusing caption that a lot of people share with each other online. For example, "I tried to show Neil a hilarious meme about a grumpy cat."

Neil

The word 'meme' was actually invented by evolutionary biologist Professor Richard Dawkins to represent an idea or concept that spreads in human culture in a similar way to a gene.

Rob

Fascinating. That sounds way too complicated, Neil. Let's move on to item number two – 'grumpy' – I gave one example just now. But here's another one: "He's the grumpiest man I've ever met."

Neil

I hope you're not talking about me, Rob. Number three – 'to go viral' – means 'an image, video, or other piece of information that gets passed on very quickly from person to person on the Internet'. For example, "What makes a video go viral?"

Rob

I don't know, Neil – If I knew how to make a viral video, I'd be a rich man by now!

Neil

Before computers and the internet we only talked about viral infections, didn't we? "I've got a nasty viral infection so I'm not coming into work today."

Rob

Yeah, that's right. The connection is that both viral infections and viral memes spread quickly!

Neil

OK – number four. 'Peers' are people the same age as our selves who share the same social position in a group.

Rob

For example, "Teenagers often worry about looking silly in front of their peers." Next up – arousal – that means 'to excite a particular feeling in somebody'.

Neil

We heard about high and low-arousal emotions. The verb is 'to arouse'. For example, "The debate aroused strong feelings on both sides."

Rob

OK, finally – 'to fire someone up' means 'to make someone excited and enthusiastic about something'. "I'm really fired up about today's vocabulary!"

Neil

Good to know, Rob. But it's time to go now, but please check out our Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube pages.

Rob

Bye-bye!

Neil

Goodbye!

Rob

Shall we watch that 'Dancing Baby' now, Neil?

Neil

No.