Opinion Science Podcast
Hosted by Andy Luttrell

Episode #1: Word of Mouth with Jake Teeny
April 13th, 2020

Web: http://opinionsciencepodcast.com/
Twitter: @OpinionSciPod
Facebook: OpinionSciPod

Andy Luttrell: 0:08
Okay, I'll admit it. I was a child magician. It's what defined my childhood and adolescence. I was doing magic tricks constantly for friends, always having my face in a magic book. And from about fifth grade until the end of high school, I was doing magic shows at birthday parties, summer festivals, school events, you name it. I was operating a little business and of course, I wanted that business to grow. So I went to the library. I'd get books on marketing. I bought promotional materials designed specifically for entertainers. I was all in. I think, actually, that's where my interest in psychology and persuasion started. How could I get the parents of the world to book me—The Great Andini—for their events?

But I didn't really have to buy ads in newspapers or hang fliers around town. My little operation mostly sustained itself on word of mouth. My parents would talk to other parents. Those parents would talk to teachers and librarians. It seemed that every new birthday party I booked was because one mom heard from another mom that I was good (and let's face it, I was cheap).

And word of mouth is not just powerful for small time teenage magicians. It's also what keeps the gears turning for major consumer brands and even politicians or anyone else who requires the public to know about them. So when are people most likely to pass along a recommendation? And why do we do it? Why do we feel like it's worth anyone's time for us to share our opinions?

To learn more about word of mouth, I talked to Jake Teeny. Jake is a PhD student at Ohio State University, and soon he'll be starting as an assistant professor of marketing at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. Jake studies when and why people share their opinions. Jake and I have known each other for a while. Actually, we co-author, a blog for Psychology Today called "A Difference of Opinion." We talk about public opinion, attitudes, persuasion…the kind of stuff that comes up on this show. I thought this would be a nice chance to have a chat with Jake and learn more about the psychology of word of mouth. So let's jump right in.

Andy Luttrell: 2:16
Okay, so do you want to start by just, um, I'm interested in hearing what you have to say about word of mouth as a thing. So what's your sense of how people define word of mouth as a

phenomenon?

Jake Teeny: 2:28
Yeah, that's a great question. I think it depends a lot on the researchers and their background that you speak to. So if you're coming from a social psychology perspective, word of mouth is often construed in terms of advocacy. So when and why people are trying to convince others of their beliefs. But in marketing it could be any time someone talks about a brand, talks about a business, anything of this nature.

Andy Luttrell: 2:56
So just talks about in any way?

Jake Teeny: 2:58
In any way, yeah. It could be talking bad. It could be--they just went and bought a Starbucks drink earlier in the day. Any sort of mention about a brand or its product between people unaffiliated with the company constitutes word of mouth.

Andy Luttrell: 3:13
I've heard you say that word of mouth is like the kind of thing that companies care a lot about. That sort of creeps into the questions they ask in surveys. So for a company, if we stay talking about companies and businesses, why would they care about word of mouth?

Jake Teeny: 3:26
Word of mouth is widely considered as the best form of advertising possible. In fact, you know, just to throw a couple of figures at you, about 85% of small businesses rely on word of mouth to stay afloat. 92% of consumers trust word of mouth more than any other form of information about a company. Your brand and marketers themselves…about 2/3 of them all say it's the most important form of advertising. And yet what I find most interesting is that less than 20% feel like they know how to actually influence it.

Andy Luttrell: 4:03
You mean companies feel like, by and large that they don't know how to shape word of mouth?

Jake Teeny: 4:07
Yeah, exactly, even though they regard it as the most important form of advertising.

Andy Luttrell: 4:12
The money that companies are spending on advertising is often astronomical. Is the implication of this that a lot of that is wasted efforts? If so much of actual business is being driven by just spontaneous conversations?

Jake Teeny: 4:26
I think there's definitely a shift these days in light of social media and the online revolution. You used to see a lot more money put into traditional advertising like television, radio…things of this nature. But not only are marketers putting more money into promoting word of mouth, but they're actually becoming kind of sneaky and clever about tricking other people into thinking

advertisements are word of mouth

Andy Luttrell: 4:51
Like what would that look like?

Jake Teeny: 4:53
So, for example, the marketers working on Mike Bloomberg's recent failed presidential run tried to design memes to look like they were generated by just random users when in fact, they were the result of marketers making these memes. Other marketers have used websites like Reddit, and rather than just kind of posting advertisements on the site, they actually get people to go into the comments section and write very compelling comments, which then seem like they're coming from actual consumers but are really getting people or re-directing people to go to their websites.

Andy Luttrell: 5:30
It's--so I'm gonna circle back to the fake reviews thing in a second--but when you mentioned Bloomberg, I was talking to someone just last night about this, just cause he so famously was pouring tons of money into a presidential run and so is there any reason to think that this word of mouth works differently for politics than it does for companies and products or his word of mouth? Just sort of like a more basic social thing people do that shapes everyone else's actions?

Jake Teeny: 6:00
Yeah, you know, I think with businesses and companies, one of the reasons it's most effective is because people don't trust traditional advertising. They think that businesses are going to put their best face forward, even if it's a lie. And so if you get feedback from another customer, it's a little bit more trustworthy and reliable. And that's why it's typically been shown to be so impactful. When it comes to politics, I imagine that there is similar distrust in regard to the source of the message when it's coming from, like the politician's camp, but maybe not to the same extent that consumers expect it with businesses.

Andy Luttrell: 6:39
But even so, I guess this just does circle back to the fake reviews. I mean, this is a case where it's not more trustworthy to go off what seems like word of mouth. So is there—maybe you don't know what the data are—but are there shifts in people's trust in word of mouth given, given new means of communicating?

Jake Teeny: 7:00
Yeah, you know, to be honest, most of the research--so pretty much when you look at any research on word of mouth and the impact of word of mouth, it unanimously says it's the most meaningful form of advertising. But a lot of that research was done in, you know, five years ago at the earliest, and so I think there is a rapid shift in the ecology of information and how people are trusting it. And so we could very, very likely see people trusting word of mouth less.

Andy Luttrell: 7:31
But this is an area that's been--there's been lots of energy in this area. That's my impression these days. And so what are the new kids saying about word of mouth?

Jake Teeny: 7:44
So kind of the original focus of word of mouth was on whether or not it was impactful. And the reason that this was often the focus was because it was very easy to study in the lab. You could just give people a message and see whether it was impactful. Today, the real kind of trend and word of mouth research is trying to figure out well, why and when do people engage in word of mouth and spread word of mouth? Because, you know, as I was saying, earlier marketers really don't understand how to influence it. So they're trying to get a better understanding of how to promote it or, you know, make the buzz happen. Um, so much more of the research has focused on the antecedents of word of mouth rather than the consequences. And that's generally where you see the research heading.

Andy Luttrell: 8:28
And so what does that say? There's a good time to start talking about "Why! Why do we do this? Why would I care?" And I've seen you--as a little bit of background--I've seen you give a talk where you took a screenshot of something I posted online as an example of word of mouth. So why did I do that? Why was I compelled to share with the world some product that I liked?

Jake Teeny: 8:50
Well, I'm sure it was a very compelling reason and motive that you did it for, um but yeah. Oh, man, there's so many different reasons people engage in word of mouth. And in addition to the difficulty of studying it in the lab, before computers and digital media, it was just hard to study what people talked about. There has also been a difficulty in trying to identify the very diverse set of motives that underlies people's reasons for engaging in word of mouth. There have been some attempts by researchers to try and categorize it. So you know, they'll say a big part of word of mouth is impression management. So we talk about brands and purchases to make ourselves look good. A big part of it is emotion regulation, so trying to make ourselves feel better after bad or good information. Sometimes we want to persuade others. Sometimes we want to bond or connect with others. You know, both people like the same brand or something like that. So there's really a large number of reasons why this happens, and now we're kind of getting enough data that it could be organized into a more systematic the depiction.

Andy Luttrell: 10:02
But mostly what I'm hearing from you is that it's selfish, right? Most of those motivations that you were talking about are like it's all about me. Am I gonna look cool? Um, I'm gonna make friends? Do I get to say what I think is important? Has there been any interest in, like, I don't know, call it "altruistic word of mouth," like people are just truly motivated to say: "this will make your life better! So it's my duty to tell you about this product that exists."

Jake Teeny: 10:29
Yeah. No, there actually has been less work on that, but that is definitely a motive that drives people's intentions to engage in word of mouth. In fact, there was a recent paper looking at how social closeness—so, how close you are interpersonally with the target of your word of mouth—impacts word of mouth. And what they find is that when you're speaking word of mouth to distant others, you're more likely to talk about positive things because that makes you look good. Talking about positive stuff makes you look better. But when it comes to people we're really close to, we're actually more likely to share negative word of mouth with them because we want

to help them. We want to protect them from bad purchases or bad brands, so the motive is definitely there. But it is overwhelmingly shadowed by kind of the perspective that we want to enhance ourselves or make ourselves feel better.

Andy Luttrell: 11:25
Okay, so let's talk about what you've done in this field. Based on what I know of the stuff that you've done, most of what you've talked to about this has been sort of the state of the literature in general. So, both what have you done in the past to try and get a handle on what word of mouth is, how it works, why people do it, and what sorts of things seem like they're the unopened or unanswered questions that you're looking at next.

Jake Teeny: 11:49
So, well keep in mind that I'm still a graduate student, so my production level is not as great as it one day hopefully will be. But some of the stuff that I've worked on, you know, one of the biggest predictors of word of mouth is the physiological arousal that people feel in response to the information. So how kind of energized or buzz they feel. And they find this in so many different domains. You know, the New York Times articles that elicit the most arousal, um, are the most likely to be shared. Memes that generate the most arousal are the most likely to be shared, so on and so forth. But for all the data…

Andy Luttrell: 12:27
Can I pause you there for a second? So what does that feel like? So this is one of those cases where there's a language to the psychology that may not necessarily be what the experience feels like. Like when you say that, I've never opened up The New York Times and been like, "Zowie! I just am so energized now!" So maybe it's hard to unpack, but what have they done to measure like what is arousing or energizing about information?

Jake Teeny: 13:01
Yeah, no, that's a good point. I mean, first off, arousal is kind of a tricky word because it has a little bit of a different connotation, especially if you type it into a Google image search. When researchers are talking about arousal, they're talking about essentially the activation of your parasympathetic nervous system or the feelings therein. So when you feel excited and you kind of got that buzz inside of you. That's arousal. But similarly so is when you feel really anxious and you kind of feel that buzz inside of you, that's also arousal.

So it's this active mobility state that derives from ancient evolution in terms of getting us to do things. So if you've ever dranken a lot of coffee, and you kind of just feel wired, that's high arousal. And it comes in two different forms, so there's energetic arousal. It's kind of that positive energy you feel when you have, you know, you've learned some good news or you're heading off to a vacation. And then there's tense arousal, and tense arousal is associated with negative experiences or anticipating undesirable outcomes, that kind of anxiety you feel in response to these two things. And so there's all this research showing that arousal--So if you read this New York Times article and, you know, you learn that they're giving out free cars to the first 10 callers, you get really excited. You feel that arousal and then you act on it or you share it with others.

But for all the research on arousal, no one really understood why it motivated, Um, word of mouth. You know, there had been some suggestions that just makes people more active, and they want to do anything after feeling more aroused. But with my research, we really wanted to try and better understand why this fundamental predictor work. Because when you understand why it works, then you can hopefully influence it better. And what we found is that arousal, uh, is linked with so much word of mouth because word of mouth is one very powerful way to kind of modulate our arousal. So we don't like high tense arousal. We want to get back to low feelings of low tenseness like peace and calmness. But also, we don't like low feelings of energetic arousal. We don't like feeling drowsy or complacent, and so we share to kind of boost our arousal. So depending on what kind of arousal you're feeling, more tents or more energetic people will share to either increase their energetic arousal or decrease their tense arousal.

Andy Luttrell: 15:32
And so you show that when people have those opportunities, it returns them to baseline or something like that?

Jake Teeny: 15:37
Exactly. Exactly. So you know, in the lab we had participants actually text their friends either about things that they were excited about our things they were anxious about. And we showed for those that were allowed to actually text their friends, when they were able to text their friends about exciting events, it made them more excited and increase their energetic arousal. However, if they weren't able to text their friends, we see a sharp decline in energetic arousal. So people use word of mouth as a way to kind of feel good, you know, to keep that buzz going. And then on the flip side, when they have bad information, even if you're not allowed to share it with people, it's still that kind of tenseness decreases a little bit over time. But if you're actually allowed to engage in word of mouth, you can really drop that tense arousal a lot faster. So people are using word of mouth as this arousal management strategy.

Andy Luttrell: 16:31
And in those studies you were using…was it products? Or what was it that were people sharing?

Jake Teeny: 16:36
Oh, those were just broadly construed as consumer experiences, so they ranged from everything having to pay dues at a clinic to getting tickets to uh, John Elton Concert. Elton John. I was like, "John Elton" didn't sound right, but..

Andy Luttrell: 16:54
like, I have not heard of John Elton coming through town. But that very well could be what your students participants might have been interested in. So, in general, the kinds of work that you've done—seems like, if I'm remembering what you said, mostly consumer things, right?

Jake Teeny: 17:13
So, I've done some from the like a more social political aspect, too. So when people try to convince others of what politician to vote for or what stands to take on a social issue. And we find that really it doesn't matter what the topic is. The psychology remains pretty similar across them. But I've also looked at those domains as well.

Andy Luttrell: 17:39
What you're describing here is a lot about sharing information, right? Like I just kind of tell you about this thing and it kind of helps me sustain my excitement for it, or it helps me manage this emotional experience. But is that different…? Because then you described a case of trying to convince somebody else. So are those two things different? Is me just saying like, "Wow, I'm really loving this new album by this musical artist…" Is that different from me saying like, "you had better check out this album"?

Jake Teeny: 18:09
Yeah, no, I think that's an important distinction that can get lost and has been lost in a lot of the literature. Until recently, those two types of word of mouth weren't really distinguished--this kind of persuasive word of mouth where I'm trying to convince you to do something versus more of just a sharing word of mouth. Um, where I'm just kind of telling you about my experience. Essentially, what researchers find is anything that predicts the persuasive form of word of mouth also predicts the sharing word of mouth. But there are some things, um, that only predict the sharing side of things. So if you're very clear about what your opinion on a topic is, you probably have no problem saying, "Oh, yeah, this is what I think." But only, when you believe that your stance is correct, it's valid, it's the right attitude to have, do you actually go out and try to persuade people. So it's not just enough to know what you think, you have to know what you think is right.

Andy Luttrell: 19:07
Does it seem like going out to persuade is more effortful? So, like I'm thinking it's easy for me to like, dash off a tweet and say like, "Oh, I love this thing." But it's a different thing for me to sit down and be like, "Let me tell you why you have to try this thing out."

Jake Teeny: 19:23
Yeah, no, I think there are definitely probably differences in the amount of effort people do between this persuasion versus sharing. But you can think of thoughtless persuasion and very thoughtful sharing as well. I think, um, one of the main differences is people's identity gets staked a little bit differently. So, for example, if I tell you that I really recommend you watch this movie, I'm kind of putting my reputation on the line a little bit, versus I just say, "Oh, man, I really liked this movie." I'm not necessarily recommending it for you. Well, there I'm not as at stake as much. And so I think there are a little different social consequences. So when you talk about effort, um, there just might be slightly different costs between trying to persuade someone versus just sharing with them.

Andy Luttrell: 20:16
And, yeah, maybe it does commit you to it more. I'm thinking of times where if I were to just sort of say off offhand like, "Oh, I really love this movie" and then if someone says, "Oh, I hated it," I backpedal immediately. "I mean, everyone has taste, and I—maybe I didn't actually like it that much." But in some ways, if you're like, "no, you have to watch this movie," like, "you're gonna love this." "And this is why it's great." If someone goes like, "Oh, I didn't really like it that much," you've kind of committed, like you're almost displaying that you're committing to this position by going out on a limb to try to persuade people. And it reminds me a little bit… I'm

curious if something like a cognitive dissonance thing could kick in where it's like…Well, there's all that research on hypocrisy, right? So there's an area of research where people find that when individuals actively try to advocate for some position or some behavior, and then they are reminded that they don't actually always do the thing they're telling other people to do, that makes them feel uncomfortable and then actually gets them to start doing the thing they've been telling people to do. And the reason is because by going out on a limb and telling people what they ought to be doing, kind of commits you to that position in a very public way. And so I wonder if persuasion just in general does that. Or even beyond whether it actually commits people, their audience feels like, "Wow, this person must really know where they stand if they're telling me where I should stand."

Jake Teeny: 21:49
Yeah, no, uh, actually, it reminds me of this really kind of fun study where they found… So they looked at two different kinds of word of mouth and its impact on people. You could imagine word of mouth as this persuasion—I recommend that you watch this movie—or as just more sharing where "I like this movie." And as you might expect, readers of those reviews, when they read the persuasive one—"I recommend it"—they're more likely to actually go out and watch the movie than if they just read the one that says "I like it." What's kind of paradoxical is that experts on that topic are more likely to use the "I like it" language, whereas novices or low knowledge people are more likely to use the "I recommend it" language. So essentially, we're getting this effect where people are following the advice of novices more than experts because novices tend to be using this more explicit endorsement language.

Andy Luttrell: 22:49
What is it about experts that they prefer that "I like it" language? Is there… Do you know why?

Jake Teeny: 22:54
I don't remember exactly what they say in this study, but from other work, I believe it just has to do a little bit more, um, with the cautiousness or skepticism that comes with expertise. You know, just like researchers, psychologists are hesitant to say, "Always do this. Never do that." When you're an expert and you know all the nuance to it, you're a little more tentative in how you give your recommendations or your advice.

Andy Luttrell: 23:22
What are the challenges in doing word of mouth research? So part of me in hearing what you're describing is reminding me of word of mouth in the wild, which is messy and all over the place in infiltrating every corner of our existence. But we know that those are hard places to really get a great handle on what people are thinking when they make these decisions. And so I just wonder, since you've been steeped in this for so long, what do you think are like, the main fundamental challenges of doing research on word of mouth?

Jake Teeny: 23:55
Yeah, you know, the biggest issue, I think, is one that has been a little remedied today, but is the issue that's kind of plagued this field of research for the beginning, and it's just a matter of getting naturalistic conversation in the lab. We now have great access to big data sets like you're talking about. You know, Twitter, um, and Facebook and all these online posts. But that's a lot

different than the conversations people have in person. In fact, there's a lot of research disentangling the two and showing that people talk about things differently online and in different frequency than that they do in person. So to really understand, like how we can generate that person to person buzz is just difficult to study in the lab because they require an elaborate set up. It's hard not to make it feel artificial or contrived. And so really trying to figure out a paradigm where you can get more naturalistic conversation between participants or friends will probably be the next biggest step in word of mouth research, particularly if you want to understand the mechanisms and motivations because we can all go to big data and scrape that big data for information. But we can't really get inside the black box of the person who typed that unless we bring them into the lab and put them through studies or self-report surveys and things of that nature.

Andy Luttrell: 25:20
And what are the kinds of things we'd want to know from people? If all we see is their tweets or their Facebook post of their blog post, what would you love to also know about them?

Jake Teeny: 25:31
Oh, yeah. I mean, a lot of it would be kind of like the psychological mechanism that precipitated the sharing. So, you know, we've all had the instance where we liked the movie but told no one about it, and then we liked another movie for a similar degree. But then are telling everybody about it. So what is it about those two? What are the differences and how the consumer perceived the movie or perceived their experience that really led them to go out and talk to others?

Andy Luttrell: 26:05
So we've got challenges to address in terms of actually accessing the minds of people who are doing this. You sort of alluded to it just now, but what are the remaining big questions? Like, what are people most actively debating in terms of when, why how? What's the big unknowns in word of mouth right now?

Jake Teeny: 26:27
Yeah, you know, because word of mouth is, as we've been discussing, can be tricky to study in the lab, it's a little bit of random scatterplot of what has been studied and what is being studied. So I wouldn't say there's any one big burning kind of question that is driving word of mouth researchers. Right now, I'd say there's a big trend to analyzing big data and then trying to replicate some of the effects they find they're in the lab. But one area I think we'll see start to emerge is how consumers perceive other consumers in engaging in word of mouth? So when we share about a movie we really like with somebody, we oftentimes don't share it with anybody. We share with the specific set of people, at least in person to person conversations. So what about the perception of these other consumers leads someone to share word of mouth with them? Most of the work is focused on the individual consumer's own attitudes and beliefs and how those contribute to sharing word of mouth. But word of mouth is always an interpersonal interaction. So how do our perceptions of others and their attitudes in their beliefs inform who and how we engage in word of mouth?

Andy Luttrell: 27:47
Are these big open questions or are these the questions you're looking at right now?

Jake Teeny: 27:51
Oh, no. Big open questions. I mean, coincidentally, they're also ones I'm looking at because there's so much space to be asking questions. But we're starting to see a lot of, uh, this kind of perspective in social psychology and looking at advocacy in that regard. Um, I think one of the reasons maybe this is a little slower to emerge in marketing is because it may be more difficult for brands or companies to influence, you know, the perceptions of others. And so they're more interested in "what can we do to motivate individual consumers to share?" rather than trying to figure out, "Well, why did they share all the time?"

Andy Luttrell: 28:32
What's like right on the horizon for you in your program of work?

Jake Teeny: 28:37
Yeah. So, um right now I've been looking at a lot of political word of mouth and, uh, why people don't want to engage in it with others of opposite stance. So, you know, the U. S is plagued with polarization right now. And people, both sides are becoming more extreme. And the way to get common ground is to get people of opposite sides to talk to one another and find out, "Oh, yeah, your attitude isn't as extreme as I expected it to be." So I've been really trying to understand the perspective and inferences that people make about those on the other side of the aisle.

Andy Luttrell: 29:17
So when someone just expresses a political opinion, how were they viewed? Is that kind of what you're saying?

Jake Teeny: 29:23
Yeah, but most… But in particular a political opinion opposite to your own. How can we get people to engage in this kind of interpersonal discourse in a civic and, you know, helpful manner?

Andy Luttrell: 29:37
So if people are, it sounds like some of this is, how do we change people's reactions to political discourse? Right? So if you're saying, How am I…? I see someone online and they say something and I go, "I don't agree with that." I could perceive that in ways that opened me up to conversation with that person or perceive it in ways that closed me to that conversation. Is that kind of what you're getting at?

Jake Teeny: 30:02
Yeah, yeah, part of it. But sometimes, you know, I think there's even a step before the person expresses their opinion. Like if you just know your friend is Republican and you're a Democrat, you may not even bridge the topic because of inferences or expectations you made ahead of time. So how can we kind of sidestep those or get people to re-construe them to say, "you know what? Let me have a conversation with this person and let me see if we can't, uh, kind of find some middle ground."

Andy Luttrell: 30:34

What is it about word of mouth… to make this about you… What is it about word of mouth that's interesting to you? Like why? Why this? There are a million things that people do in the in their lives. Why? Why? Word of mouth being that captures your interest?

Jake Teeny: 30:48
Yeah. You know, um, in research it's often described that people study one of two things. Either one, what they know very well themselves. Or two, what they don't understand at all. And I am in that latter camp. I don't do a lot of word of mouth. You know, I'll recommend a movie here, there, But some people are constantly talking, constantly sharing their opinions, and I just don't understand it. And so this really excites me to try and figure out why people are doing this and maybe how I could get better at word of mouth myself because it is valuable. We know how impactful it can be on influencing others' attitudes and beliefs. Um and so maybe I can even figure out how to motivate myself to convince others to vote for who I want to vote for.

Andy Luttrell: 31:34
So have all of these years of reading about word of mouth and studying word of mouth and asking people about whether they would recommend stuff… Has any of that changed anything that you've done in your life? Have you become an advocate as a result of this? Have you stopped advocating? It sounds like you didn't, uh, do it as much before. But has anything changed for you?

Jake Teeny: 31:54
Yeah, that's a good question. Um, no, probably. If anything, I've become less word of mouth because as soon as I have any urge to engage in word of mouth, I immediately begin an analysis of why I felt that way or wanted to do it. And by the time I've concluded my review, I pretty much lost all interest in saying what I was going to say in the first place.

Andy Luttrell: 32:19
If I'm watching a movie, I'll be like writing the review in my head as I watch the movie. But then, yeah, then it's like then it feels like, Well, now I have my review in case anyone asks me what my opinion was. But I'm kind of tired of my review by then, I'm like, Well, I spent the last two hours writing this review. It seems like I've solved whatever problem I had that made me write the review, so I don't I don't actually need to share that with anybody.

Jake Teeny: 32:47
Yeah, yeah, No, I feel very similarly. And, you know, I think another underlying drive behind word of mouth, and this is more on the consumer side, is I've always just been really curious about why things become popular, you know? Why did Twilight become such a sensation? Even though, you know the writing's not that good, this story's a little trite, but you know, a lot of it had to deal with the word of mouth. You look at movie sales and stuff, and you can almost you can very strongly predict their success by the burst and word of mouth that happens in the week leading up to its release. And so what is it? What about that movie or that product led to such popularity? Why is it now kind of a national talking point? And so that's always been really curious to me as well.

Andy Luttrell: 33:35

Do we know? So there's a book I'm forgetting now… what it's called? Maybe I'll look it up. Have you read the book *Hit Makers*? It was a very cool book. It was written by… I'm gonna pull it up. Yeah. It was called—the title's *Hit Makers: How to Succeed in an Age of Distraction*. And it was written by Derek Thompson. I think he's a writer for the Atlantic or something. And so he pulls—yeah, Derek Thompson, senior editor at the Atlantic magazine—pulls a bunch of cool social science research to basically ask that question of what is it that makes things popular? What are the qualities of popular things? And if I'm remembering right, I'm sure I'm getting this wrong at least a little bit, but there's some website where they were able to, like play pop songs as they were being developed, and they were using, like, just crowdsource people's initial reactions and excitedness about those songs to sort of pick, like which ones they were gonna invest in to try and make… get super popular. And it seems like if also, if I'm remembering right, there's nothing super tangible about like, why one song excites people more than another, but nevertheless, we have access to people's first reactions, and that is informative, right? So we haven't cracked the code of why one song goes viral and the other one doesn't. Unless maybe you know something that I don't. Is there…

Jake Teeny: 35:12
Yeah, yeah, so who you should really have on your podcast is Jonah Berger because he does a lot of this research and, um is a big name in the field. But he has some recent work looking at why songs become more or less popular. And one of the key drivers he finds is that when a song is a little atypical for its genre, that tends to really help with its success. Now, too atypical and it kind of tanks it, but just different enough from the crowd. So, you know, there was the, uh, that Old Town Road song that became a huge success. And even though it has maybe a little bit of a hip hop feel to it, it was released in a country genre, and the atypicality of that really kind of helped propel it to the monumental success that it had. And Jonah has some work looking at songs and also has it looking at movies, too, where a little bit of atypicality for its genre leads to greater popularity, and success.

Andy Luttrell: 36:20
Does that stem back to the energizing quality that you were talking about earlier? That there's just something that it captures your attention. It's sort of like dissonant music makes you feel a little uncomfortable because it's not quite what you're used to hearing--

Jake Teeny: 36:35
I definitely think that's involved. Yeah. I don't think he has nailed down a particular mechanism behind it, but it does seem to be a pretty robust effect. And across a number of different domains. So, yeah, interesting work. There we go. Another driving question for the field. Why does atypicality promote popularity?

Andy Luttrell: 36:55
You're welcome for that idea. Well, I think that's all the time we have here. So thank you, Jake, for being with me. This is super cool to hear about word of mouth stuff and hopefully we can talk to you again soon.

Jake Teeny: 37:08
Yeah, sounds good. Thanks, Andy.

Andy Luttrell: 37:20
All right. Welcome back, everybody. Thank you again to Jake for having that conversation about word of mouth. I want to follow up on a couple of things that came up toward the end of our talk. I was really interested when we were talking about what makes music super popular. How can we predict which songs become popular? So I went back to that book *Hit Makers* that I referenced in our conversation just to see if I was crazy. Did I actually remember this coming up? And I was right. There are services out there online that allow the music industry to sort of pre-test whether their songs are catchy enough to get a lot of airplay. One of those service is called Hit Predictor, and basically what they do is they just have thousands of people evaluate how catchy a new song is and so they can get a catchiness score for each song before they spend a bunch of money promoting it. So they'll just play a hook from the new song and an online audience is going to listen to it, and just give their impression of how catchy it is. And they take a composite of all the scores that people give for these songs. And in his book, he mentions, for example, that the song Hello by Adele, which went on to be obviously a smash hit, scored really, really high on this metric, which is consistent with it becoming such a popular song.

He also points out, for example, that a couple songs but Justin Bieber that I couldn't sing for you if I tried, by Drake, The Weeknd, etc. also scored really high in the fall of 2015 and those are songs that went on to be popular. One thing I think I mischaracterized about this, though, is that Derek Thompson, in his book, isn't saying that there are objective, mystical qualities to a pop song that guarantee its success. It's not quite what he's saying. He's saying that not only are these super famous pop songs, or just songs in general, scoring really high on perceived catchiness, but so are other songs that you've never heard of before because they didn't catch on. And so his point is: Yes, there are certain songs that are way more likely to catch on because they have some magic quality. But his real point is that only if that song gets air play is it actually going to become a hit. Exposure is really important for what ends up catching on. So it's not that people are listening to every single new song that comes out in deciding for themselves whether they want to tell other people about. There are certain tastemakers in the industry that shape which are the songs that get played on the radio, which are the songs that get-- which are the songs that show up in movies, et cetera, TV, whatever and those are really responsible for popularity.

Jake also mentioned this study by Jonah Berger about something we can capture about a song that predicts its popularity. It was this study that was published in 2018 in the journal Psychological Science by Jonah Berger and Grant Packard, and what they did was pull all of the Billboard digital download rankings from 2014 to 2016. These Billboard rankings tracked downloads for most of the places people get their music, including, for example, iTunes and Google Play. So they have a ton of different songs and how popular they were given as how often they were downloaded in this three year span. Then they pulled the lyrics for all of those songs and, using digital text analysis technology, were able to see what kinds of words form themes across these songs. And they found themes like anger and violence related words—like words like *bad, dead, hate, kill…* and words like family-related words: *American, Boy, Daddy, Mama*. Words related to girls and cars formed their own theme: *car, drive, girl, kiss*. And words related to spirituality: *believe, grace, Lord*.

And they found that genres of songs, on average, would have different patterns of language use. So, for example, not too surprisingly, Christian music emphasizes those spirituality-related words more than most other genres. Country music emphasizes language about girls and cars more than most other music. Rap music includes anger and violence related words more often, and rock music uses words related to passionate love more often than other genres.

And so what they did was then take each individual song and its lyrics to see how well a song's lyrics matched the patterns that are typical for its genre. So, for example, they would take a specific country song and see whether its lyrics have girls and cars-related language like that genre tends to have. But also does that specific song also emphasize anger and violence, which is unusual for that genre. And overall, they find that the more a song's lyrics show patterns that are pretty different from the patterns of words used in that entire genre, the more popular that song was, meaning the more it was downloaded on iTunes, Google play, et cetera. So this is what Jake was talking about. We have some insight into what it is that makes a certain song more likely to catch on and presumably these are the songs we share with each other. I know I'm guilty of hearing a new song that captures my attention for some reason and wanting to share it with other people. Maybe for some of the reasons that Jake talked about.

So overall, if we think about a song's popularity, it seems like there's a lot going on. There are some things that are intrinsic to a song that make it especially catchy that people can tell early on whether a song is catchy has a good hook, and it may be driven, at least in part, by how different it is from the kinds of songs you normally hear. But it's also the case that not every great, catchy song is going to take off. There are other forces at play in our society and our culture and even random luck of the draw.

All right, that's gonna do it for this time. Thanks again for being here on Opinion Science Podcast. If you want to learn more about Jake and his work, go ahead and check out jaketeeny.com – T-E-E-N-Y – to see that kind of research that he's doing, the work that he's doing on word of mouth, and other sorts of topics. And also, Jake is really interested in communicating psychology to the public. And so on his website, you'll be able to see his blog, *Everyday Psychophilosophy*, which he's kept for a long time. I really admire the amount of time he's put in to communicating psychology to the world.

You can check out more about the show at opinionsciencepodcast.com, or like us on Facebook. Follow on Twitter. Whatever you have to do, but that's going to do it for us this week. We'll see you back next time when we learn more about the science of opinions. See you then.