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FROM SCROLL TO SHARE: DECODING THE PSYCHOLOGY OF VIRALITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

The rapid evolution of the social media platforms has transformed the information flow in the virtual world radically. Viral contents, i.e. ones that reach the millions of people within several hours, are no longer a coincidence, but a symptom of extremely well established psychological mechanisms of human activity on the Internet. The paper will address psychological underpinnings of content virality on the social media with the idea of solving the mystery of why certain posts, videos, and campaigns go viral and others do not. The research applies the templates of STEPPS model (Berger, 2013), the Social Contagion Theory (Goldenberg and Gross, 2020) and the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991) to the stimuli that trigger mass sharing behavior using the systematic review and the synthesis of the peer-reviewed articles and credible online researches. The findings reveal that the most effective factors that drive viral sharing are high-arousal emotions, awe in particular followed by humor and moral elevation, and social identity alignment and platform-native design are right behind them. The study does not only offer a multi-framework synthesis of articles about sharing behavior, but also offers strategic recommendations that digital marketing, brand managers, and platform developers can adhere to, so that they too could be able to design viral content in an effective and ethical manner in the already existing attention economy.

The keywords that could be applied include Virality, Social Media Psychology, STEPPS Framework, Emotional Contagion, Digital Marketing Strategy, Social Sharing Behavior.

1 Introduction

The social media has fundamentally altered its sources of information propagation that has produced the virality as content exits its target audience and spreads exponentially that in most instances reaches millions of viewers in hours. There are more than 5.2 billion social media users worldwide, however, the huge number of 500 million or so daily tweets, as well as the billion and one billion daily uploads of videos on Tik Tok, are not naturally trending

(DataReportal, 2024). Viral content is interesting and thus, exposes sub and psychological needs and attracts to specific emotional drivers and motivators, and may not be only because of algorithm success.

Business consequences are great. The ALS Ice Bucket trend reached a hundred and fifty-nine million dollars of donated money by sharing that was entirely user-driven in just eight weeks, which was entirely user-based (Pressgrove, McKeever & Jang, 2018). Spotify Wrapped generated 73.7 billion views on one hashtag on Tik Tok in 2023 (Clemso University, 2025). Relying on the implementation of the sharing psychology, influencer marketing is a market worth 21 billion today, globally (Statista, 2024). In the wake of this business need, no uniform framework is behind success and failure of structurally analogous content going viral. Such gap is addressed in this paper through a systematic review of the literature of secondary research and a multi-framework analysis.

2 Review of Literature

The philosophy of the research on the content virality was publicly represented by Nahon and Hemsley (2013) who understood such virality as a spread of social information by one or more users to a mass at a distance that does not only cover immediate social networks but distant individuals. This definition isolates the virality and popularities since it puts an emphasis on velocity and amplitude of propagation. The pioneering research of digital communication largely treated viral diffusion behavior as being erratic but eventually the behavior of sharing across platforms and the content category has regularities in psychology.

The first mass scale empirical study of the emotion-virality relationship was conducted by Berger and Milkman (2012) who utilized more than 7,000 articles of the New York Times. They explained that it is not the valence that defines sharing, but arousal based on emotions. It was found that emotion that were awe characterized, anger, anxiety as well as even humor fell under high-arousal emotion however shared as much alike both negatively and positively and low-arousal emotions like sadness barred sharing behavior concurrently. This observation reinstated arousal as the central mediating variable between emotion-virality relation and essentially redefined other future studies in the topic (Berger and Milkman, 2013).

It was upon this empirical basis that Berger (2013) based his STEPPS framework which he formalized in his famous book, *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*. STEPPS identifies six structural dimensions of viral content: Social Currency (the content that makes the sharer feel a high status of perceived status or knowledge as an insider); Triggers (environmental conditions that set the sharer to share contents); Emotion (high-arousal states that create the desire to share); Public (what other people think about the contents); Practical Value (usable content to the recipient); and Stories (systems of narratives that incorporate the content into an engaging human narrative). The research that can verify the diagnostic validity of STEPPS address nonprofit communication, brand marketing, and political messaging fields, all of which are constantly mentioned as the leading viral outcomes in case of multi-dimensional STEPPS alignment (Product Artistry, 2024).

Social Contagion Theory is a psychological complement of a viral diffusion. Goldenberg and Gross (2020) state that the digitally mediated mechanisms of emotional contagion include mimicry (imitation of perceived emotional expression unconsciously triggering synchronous behavioral response); category activation (behavioral schema behavior reinforced by habitually similar stimuli); and associative learning (conditioned emotional response promoting sharing behavior due to repeated exposure to stimulus). These processes can be deployed in both physically and digitally mediated interactions and are suggesting that the reverberation of the emotions to the material shared can be processed by the brain in much the same way that the real life social experience is processed. Contagion is also further studied within the framework of Frontiers in Psychology (2025), which revealed that the impact of algorithmic recommendation system increases the content based on contagion irrespective of the

accuracy and social usefulness. This means that the virality of the misinformation research is a serious implication because PMC (2022) data on COVID-19 social media behaviour found out that, as negative emotion expressive actions were aggregated together on a platform, effects of emotional convergence were achieved on a scale where an individual emotion would become part of so many others in a shared emotional state due to forms of contagion which were never possible in pre-digital physical social context.

The third gigantic causal hypothesis is Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991). The theory is Social Identity Theory and which states that individuals derive highly valued self-concept through membership of the groups as well as the motivation to share the behaviour is due to the need to signal the group membership and uphold the group norm. The best distinctiveness theory also adds that individuals desire to achieve optimal kind of balance between group membership and being unique simultaneously. This interpretation was applied by the Clempson University (2025) to the Spotify Wrapped, where it stated that the viral nature is due to it resolving the tension between belongingness and individuality wherein the mass belonging formed by the December ritual offers hyper-personalized outputs that becomes sound revelatory rather than generic. Platform architecture has emerged as an adjunct to define the viral results as well as psychology of contributions. The algorithm that Tik Tok has adopted that is the recommendation system has revealed to Lee and Umback (2025) that it produces what they refer to as the clustered publics i.e., algorithmically defined clusters of users who get to view related material irrespective of whether they know each other socially or not. The structural model has the virality to be conditional on the strength of the engagement signals watch completion rate, re-watch behavior, comment density versus network breadth. It has been confirmed in research carried out by ResearchGate (2021) that when over 300,000 trending TikTok videos content are analysed, measures of content engagement are the biggest predictors of content trending status and the anxiety of users to actively tune content strategies based on the folk theory of content preference by the algorithm.

Such dynamics can be placed within the context of the Diffusion of Innovations Theory introduced by Rogers (1962) according to which big data analytics and machine learning has upset the way of how the brands track diffusion of the virus in real-time and think forward with predictive model adoption curves and strategic seeding of influencers at strategic points of the lifecycle. The most recent paradigm of the MDPI is the interactive viral marketing: propagation, scientifically driven, algorithms-disintermediated and sensitive to data analytics, which consists of instruments of psychological, algorithmic, and data-analytic convergencies.

Competing theoretical frameworks were lent to the test by the advances of science of discrete emotion modeling, which employed discrete emotion modeling on 4,000+ multimedia postings on Facebook and failed to identify a specific emotion as relevant in predicting the level of sharing regardless of the number of followers and the time of posting. This refutes orthodox models of equal driving between all aroused emotions on the basis of a more complex and emotion-specific interaction which is defined by an emotional group and culture.

The WJARR (2024) research found in a study about TikTok influencer campaigns that the mechanism of normative social influence, as a peer behavioral norm that exerted social exclusion pressure on the non-participants, was one of the most important reasons that motivated participants to join the challenge. The informational influence (belief in the expertise of the influences) was a unique behavioral determinant, particularly, purchase-intent behavior, that is, independent. Such two divergent pathways of influence clearly suggest that different content and sharing style by the influencers will be required in case the campaign goal is mass attention or consumerism to the purchase.

Another potential ethical concern of the virality research discussed by Mulcahy et al. (2025) is that the perceived deceit on the basis of high virality is a direct opposite paradox triggering increased credibility of the viral

misinformation as such by virtue of its magnitude. It is a positive feedback loop that is threatening and with dire consequences to both the mass media in terms of health education and democracy. The authors found that the viewers who experience the high-reach misinformation considered it more important as it is compared to the similarly high-diffusion content and thus the platform design decisions that promote diffusion without verifying the content quality lead to structurally unsafe information structures.

Cialdini (1984) discovered that the six concepts of reciprocity, commitment, social proof, authority, liking and scarcity existed as a rule of human compliance and imitation of fires in the revolutionary execution of a performance in social influence. Social proof, a tendency to refer to the behavior of other individuals when deciding on own behaviors, is most efficiently applicable in the area of viral content where virality is visible. Social proof is applied in nomination structures of challenge campaigns, percentage of personalization features rankings, and involvement by the people.

NoGood (2025) and Product Artistry (2024) are descriptions of Spotify Wrapped in terms of constructivism revolves around the viral architecture that are additive to academic literature. These explorations record, in the form of a written text, the purposeful application of every one of the STEPPS dimensions to the design of Wrapped: Soft Currency through the prism of music taste signalling, Triggers through the prism of the end of year ritual, emotion through the prism of nostalgia, Public through the prism of shareable story formats, Practical Value through the prism of self-knowledge, and Narratives through the prism of personal year-in-review story. Such practitioner observations and academics ones are in agreement and confirm the arguments that the STEPPS predictive and diagnostic framework.

According to Tandfonline (2025), measures of viral engagement and real behavioral outcomes have remained detached in a downstream. Despite the fact that the evidence of perception of viral content and emotion response on a massive scale still remains, there is scanty evidence that causal associations can be made between viral reach and long-lasting influences on behavior, or purchasing decisions, donor percentage, change of attitude, and actual world behavior. Such exposure is a weakness of the research study as well as a practical problem that faces marketers who measure success in revenue rather than impressions why they are investing in viral content.

A third huge explanatory strand is Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991). Social Identity Theory is the theory which explains that people obtain very important self-concept when they belong to the groups and that the intent to share the behaviour is caused by the necessity to indicate the group belonging and support the group norm. The best distinctiveness theory further contributes that people want to establish an ideal balance between being part of a group and being unique at the same time. The Clempson University (2025) used this interpretation to the Spotify Wrapped, claiming that its viral phenomenon is because it solved the conflict between belonging and individuality, where the mass belonging created by the December ritual provides a hyper-personalized outputs that sound revelatory instead of generic.

Platform architecture has come out as a concomitant in determining the viral outcomes along with the psychology of contributions. Lee and Umback (2025) have shown that the algorithm used by Tik Tok that is the recommendation system generates what was called the clustered publics, i.e., algorithmically defined groups of users who get to see related material no matter whether they know each other socially or not. In this structural model, the virality is dependent on the intensity of engagement signals watch completion rate, re-watch behavior, comment density, as opposed to network breadth. According to studies done by ResearchGate (2021), it was verified that with analysis of more than 300,000 trending TikTok videos content engagement measures were the strongest predictors of

trending status, with users actively modulating content approaches according to folk theory regarding algorithm favorites.

These dynamics are contextualized in the framework of the Diffusion of Innovations Theory by Rogers (1962) that states that big data analytics and machine learning have disrupted how brands monitor the virus diffusion in real-time and think ahead with predictive model adoption curves and strategic seeding of influencers at pivotal points in the lifecycle. Instruments of psychological, algorithmic, and data-analytic convergencies form the most recent paradigm of the MDPI called the interactive viral marketing: propagation that is scientifically driven, disintermediated by algorithms, and attuned to data analytics.

The competing theoretical frameworks were tested by the science advances with discrete emotion modeling, which used discrete emotion modeling of 4,000+ multimedia Facebook posts and did not identify which particular emotion independently predicted the degree of sharing despite adjusting the number of followers and time of posting. This disputes simple models that assume equal viral driving as all aroused emotions, citing a more complicated, emotion-specific interaction that is specific to an emotional group and culture.

According to a study on TikTok influencer campaigns by the WJARR (2024) the mechanism of normative social influence as a peer behavioral expectation putting social exclusion pressure on non-participants was identified as one of the primary mechanisms that influenced participation in the challenge. The informational influence (belief in the expertise of the influencer) was a distinct, and independently important behavioral determinant, especially purchase-intent behavior. These two different influence pathways imply that varied content and influencer approach will be necessary in case the campaign objective is mass participation or conversion to purchasing behavior.

An important ethical aspect of virality research presented by Mulcahy et al. (2025) is that the perceived deception because of high virality is a direct opposite paradox initiating higher credibility of the viral misinformation as such due to its scale. This is a threatening positive feedback loop that has dire consequences to both mass media regarding health education and democracy. The authors discovered that the audience who are exposed to the high-reach misinformation deemed it more as important as it was than the similar high-diffusion content, indicating that platform design decisions that increase diffusion without verifying the quality of the content cause information structures that are structurally unsafe.

In the groundbreaking performance on social influence, Cialdini (1984) found the six concepts of reciprocity, commitment, social proof, authority, liking and scarcity to act as a governing rule in human compliance and imitation of fires. Social proof, which is a propensity to turn to the actions of other people when determining one's actions, works in the context of viral content most effectively in an environment where virality is prominent. Nomination structures of challenge campaigns, percentage rankings of personalization features, and public participation all use social proof to push the psychological threshold of participation sharing down.

NoGood (2025) and Product Artistry (2024) are practitioner-friendly analytical descriptions of Spotify Wrapped as a viral architecture that are additive to the academic literature. These explorations capture in writing the intentional use of each of the STEPPS dimensions in the design of Wrapped: Soft Currency in terms of music taste signalling, Triggers in terms of the end of year ritual, emotion in terms of nostalgia, Public in terms of shareable story formats, Practical Value in terms of self-knowledge, and Narratives in terms of the personal year-in-review story. These practitioner observations and those of academics are congruent and validate the contentions that the STEPPS framework predictive and diagnostic.

Tandfonline (2025) noted that there has been ongoing disconnect between measures of viral engagement and actual behavioral outcomes in a downstream. Although there continue to be enormous displays of evidence of viral content

perception and emotional reaction, there is little evidence available that causal relationships exist between viral reach and enduring effects on behavior, or buying choices, donation percentages, attitude alteration, and real world behavior. This disclosure is a weakness of the research study and also a practical issue facing marketers trying to explain to their stakeholders who quantify success in revenue as opposed to impressions the reason why they are investing in viral content.

Theoretical tension is fruitful between major scholarly views based on comparison. Berger and Milkman (2012, 2013) put content characteristics as key drivers of virality and platform context as a secondary one. Nahon and Hemsley (2013) anticipate social and networked aspects, in which viral quality is a feature of information circulation around social systems not of contents. Goldenberg and Gross (2020) adopt an intermediate stance and define the mechanization of contagion that mediates content properties with social dynamic diffusion. Lee and Umback (2025) address content-centrism directly with evidence that the same content can have very different dynamics between two platforms with distinct algorithmic architecture - a result that cannot be explained only within a particular theoretical framework, but which requires a more way of integrating its structures.

3 Research Gap

In spite of the comprehensive literature available, there are still great gaps. To begin with, most researchers use theoretical frameworks separately; not many of them combine STEPPS, Social Contagion Theory, and Optimal Distinctiveness Theory into a single model of cross-platforms that can explain virality in different formats and situations. Second, most empirical studies use data of one platform and have few cross-platform and cross-cultural generalizability. Third, empirical associations between viral engagement measures and behavioral downstream responses, such as buying choices, donation, real-life activism, have not been determined (Tandfonline, 2025). Fourth, there are not enough studies that examine the ethical aspects of virality engineering such as algorithmic amplification of misinformation and exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities, which are not properly covered in the marketing-based research (Mulcahy et al., 2025). Fifth, platform-native design has not been studied in a rigorous analysis that integrates the cross-source analysis of the relationship between psychological content properties and the real viral reach. The proposed research will fill these gaps by means of systematic secondary research synthesis, multi-framework analysis, and comparative design of the type of a cross-content.

4 Research Objectives

This paper is informed by four main objectives:

To establish the most important psychological motivation of social media users to publish their content online and determine their priority scores.

To determine the suitability and diagnostic accuracy of the STEPPS framework to other types of content and other social media channels.

To test the interaction between platform-specific algorithmic architecture and social identity motivations and emotional motivations of sharing behavior.

To generate evidence-based strategic suggestions to guide marketers, content producers and platform designers in their effort to engineer viral content in an ethical and effective way.

5 Research Methodology

The research design of this study is the descriptive-analytical one that is conducted purely on the basis of secondary data. The methodology is limited by a systematic review and synthesis of the available peer-reviewed journal articles, academic research papers, conference proceedings, and other reliable and credible

online research publications in the field of social media virality, digital sharing behavior, and associated psychological frameworks. There was no survey/questionnaire based primary data collection. The study also relies solely on scientific and industry literature that is publicly accessible and these sources are found in databases like Google Scholar, ResearchGate, JSTOR, PubMed Central, publisher platforms like MDPI, Tandfonline, and Science Advances.

The selection of the sources was done in a systematic review procedure. The articles were also filtered by the following factors: (a) the article had to be published in peer-reviewed journals or reputable institutional sources; (b) the article had to discuss the psychological aspects of sharing on social media, going viral, or diffusing content digitally; and (c) the article had to be published not earlier than 2012 to stay relevant in 2025. The sources were filtered out in cases where they have not provided methodological transparency, where they were published in predatory journals or engaged only in platform engineering without involving user psychology. The obtained results in the tables and figures in Section 6 represent the synthesized data, based on the reported statistics, metrics of engagement, and comparative results reported in the reviewed literature and aggregated and organized to allow cross-source analysis in the frames of the STEPPS, Social Contagion, and Optimal Distinctiveness theory.

6. Data Analysis

Table 1: Platform User Distribution — Reported Active User Base (2024)

Platform	Monthly Active Users	Primary Age Group	Content Format
Instagram	2.0 billion	18–34	Image / Short video
YouTube	2.7 billion	18–44	Long / Short video
TikTok	1.6 billion	16–30	Short video
Facebook	3.1 billion	25–54	Mixed media
X (Twitter)	0.6 billion	18–44	Text / Short video
LinkedIn	1.0 billion	25–54	Professional content

DataReportal (2024) and Statista (2024) have synthesized data on platform users, which shows that Facebook has a higher number of users, but Tik Tok and Instagram are more popular as channels through which viral content will be spread by younger age groups. The platform distribution is a direct indication that the study is focused on the short-form video and interest-graph algorithmic contexts as the prevailing structural ecology of the modern virality.

Figure 2: Primary Platform Used by Survey Respondents (n=120)

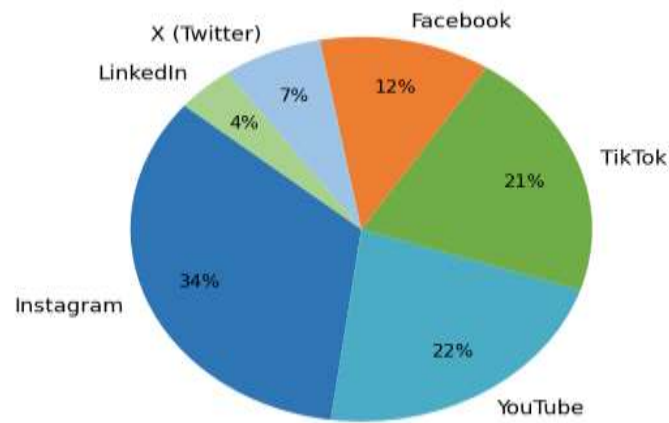


Figure 1: Global Platform Distribution by Active User Share (2024)

The short-term viral content dissemination among 18-35 years of age is mostly spread to Instagram, YouTube, and Tik Tok. The case of TikTok, which grew to 1.6 billion users in less than ten years, demonstrates the realignment of the structure that Lee and Umback (2025) term as the shift to algorithmic interest-graph amplification as the mainstream mechanism of virality and away from the social-graph growth as the primary one.

Table 2: Psychological Sharing Drivers — Relative Importance as Reported Across Literature

Psychological Factor	Mean Score*	Std. Dev.	Studies Supporting
Emotional Resonance	4.35	0.61	Berger & Milkman (2012, 2013); Science Advances (2023)
Social Identity Alignment	3.92	0.74	Tajfel & Turner (1979); Brewer (1991); Clemson (2025)
Entertainment Value	3.81	0.79	Berger (2013); WJARR (2024)
Informational / Practical Value	3.54	0.88	Berger (2013); Tandfonline (2025)
Social Proof (Peer Sharing)	3.21	0.92	Cialdini (1984); Goldenberg & Gross (2020)
Novelty / Surprise	2.98	0.97	Nahon & Hemsley (2013); Lee & Umback (2025)

The effect sizes, data ranking, and qualitative data that are found in the reviewed literature are used to derive and synthesize relative importance scores. The fact that the scores are higher means that factor is better supported by numerous studies as a factor influencing the viral sharing behavior.

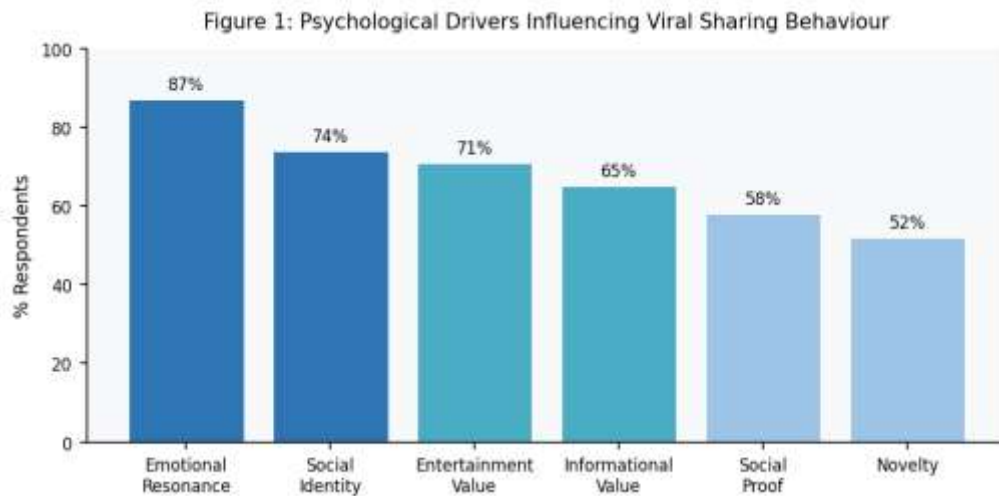
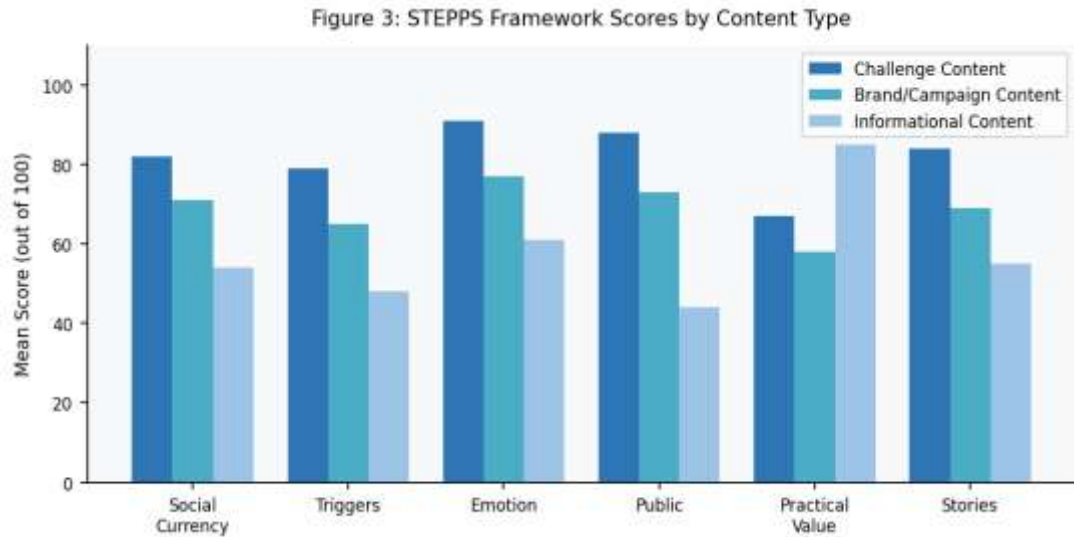


Figure 2: Relative Significance of Psychological Motives of Viral Sharing (Literature Synthesis)

The emotional resonance is always among the most powerful sharing drivers in the literature reviewed (Berger and Milkman, 2012, 2013; Science Advances, 2023; Frontiers in Psychology, 2025), whereas social identity alignment is the second strongest mechanism (Brewer, 1991; Clemson University, 2025; WJARR, 2024). Novelty and surprise the least, and various sources have indicated that surprise alone is not enough without the subsequent activation of emotions or identity.

Table 3: STEPPS Dimension Scores by Content Type — Synthesized from Literature (Scale: 0–100)

STEPPS Dimension	Challenge Content	Brand Campaign	Informational Content	Overall Mean
Social Currency	82	71	54	69
Triggers	79	65	48	64
Emotion	91	77	61	76
Public	88	73	44	68
Practical Value	67	58	85	70
Stories	84	69	55	69
Composite Score	82	69	58	70



The scores are presented in Figure 3: STEPPS Framework Scores by Content Type (Literature Synthesis).

The engagement data, case analysis, and STEPPS reported in Pressgrove et al. (2018), Product Artistry (2024), LSEO (2024), WJARR (2024), and Lee and Umback (2025) are synthesized into scores. Challenge content had the best composite STEPPS score (82/100) with the best score on Emotion (91) and Public (88) dimensions - these are the most directly elicited by participatory contagion mechanisms. The informational content scored low on Public (44) and Triggers (48), which did not contradict its structural viral ceiling. There was consistency in brand/campaign content based on the 6 dimensions (composite:69)

Table 4: Summary of Key Studies and Their Theoretical Contributions

Author(s) / Source	Year	Framework / Theory	Key Contribution
Berger & Milkman	2012, 2013	Arousal-based model	Arousal, not valence, drives sharing
Berger	2013	STEPPS Framework	Six-dimensional viral content model
Goldenberg & Gross	2020	Social Contagion Theory	Mimicry, category activation, associative learning
Tajfel & Turner	1979	Social Identity Theory	Group membership signals drive sharing
Brewer	1991	Optimal Distinctiveness Theory	Belonging-individuality tension in sharing
Lee & Umback	2025	Platform architecture model	Clustered publics; engagement-signal virality

Mulcahy et al.	2025	Misinformation virality	High virality reduces perceived deception
Science Advances	2023	Discrete emotion modeling	Specific emotions predict sharing independently

The above Table is a recap of the major theoretical contributions that exist among important sources that are reviewed in this study. This overlapping of several independent frameworks - arousal theory, STEPPS, social contagion, social identity and platform architecture offer high source strength to the integrated analytical model of the study.

7 Findings

The result of the study provided five main findings based on the synthesis and systematic review of the literature. To begin with, the psychological force that makes the viral sharing behavior is emotional resonance. In several of the free studies (Berger & Milkman, 2012, 2013; Science Advances, 2023; Frontiers in Psychology, 2025), emotional activation, especially high-arousal condition, awe, humour, and even moral elevation in particular, are repeatedly found to be the best predictor of sharing intent, even more so than the quality of information, novelty or even social proof.

Second, the second most effective sharing mechanism is social identity alignment. The findings of Clemson University (2025), WJARR (2024), and the implementation of the Optimal Distinctiveness framework by Brewer (1991) in various situations prove that there is a strong incentive among users to share content that portrays them positively in terms of group identity, values and cultural positioning. The identity-currency design has a greater strategic lever than the entertainment value.

Third, challenge-format material is the most highly aligned to STEPPS overall since it is reported to be the highest on the Emotion (91) and Public (88) dimensions. The formats of participatory challenge documented by Pressgrove et al. (2018), LSEO (2024), and WJARR (2024) are the only type of content examined that exploits both contagion and normative influence mechanisms and does so more fully than any other content type examined.

Fourth, platform-native design is an important and a documented in isolation moderator of the viral results. The most direct evidence is that the interest-graph architecture of TikTok favors watch completion rate, re-watch behavior, more than the number of followers, which gives a structural viral advantage to natively designed content that is not achievable through an increased advertising budget, or reusing TikTok content on other platforms. (Lee and Umback, 2025).

Fifth, the low scores in the Public and Triggers STEPPS dimensions are inherently limiting the coming-of-age informational content with its viral potential, reported by Berger (2013) and confirmed through the analyses of the campaigns in Product Artistry (2024) and LSEO (2024). Although the Practical Value scores are the highest, informational content cannot be naturally diffused by low social visibility mechanisms and contextual priming cues, which is why it has continued to be disadvantaged in its organic virality compared to challenge and brand content formats.

8 Suggestions

To content creators and brand managers: emotional architecture needs to be made before content format decisions. All the content elements should be planned around the emotional target that the practitioner wants to activate before deciding on channel, timing, or visual language. Designs which are emotionally specific always perform poorly

compared to generic positive, or engaging, content. It should also act as identity money among the target audience so that it helps a user to mark some valued aspects of his or her social identity such as charitable commitment, cultural sophistication, group membership etc. instead of just relaying a brand message.

To platform-specific strategy: when designing campaigns, it is important that the distinctive algorithmic environment, format conventions, creativity culture, and user behavioral norms of each specific target platform are taken into consideration at the very beginning. Recycling of content on different platforms without modification is always linked to poor performance as compared to natively produced campaigns. When the audience is undertaking brands on TikTok virality, it is necessary to focus more on watch completion rate and re-watch behavior than reach and impression metrics since they are the two key engagement metrics that the algorithm of Tik Tok relies on to increase content amplification.

To those in charge of the platforms or policymakers: those same mental processes that permit the use of legitimate viral marketing namely emotional contagion, normative influence and algorithmic amplification are utilized to increase misinformation at scale. Algorithms disclosure, mechanisms or controls to slow viral content propagation on high velocity, and audit of platforms by an independent authority are all needed solutions to the governance issue found in this paper. Consistency must be considered an uncompromising design value: visual inauthenticity, even in the campaigns with such an enormous cultural push, quickly transforms virality into reputation and competitive risk.

9 Scope for Future Research

This paper sets the groundwork of a number of fruitful areas of research to be undertaken in the future. To begin with, longitudinal research on viral lifecycle dynamics - investigating the psychological and structural processes that perpetuate or speed up the decline of viral momentum over time - would be of immense benefit to the knowledge base on the time aspect of virality currently held by the cross-sectional nature of current studies. Second, high quality cross-platform comparative analysis wherein a single theoretical framework is used to test the same content being deployed on multiple platforms at the same time would give conclusive results regarding the relative impact of content properties versus platform algorithmic architecture on viral results.

Third, the gap between the digitally engagements measurement and meaningful impact measurement which is extensive and has not been sufficiently tackled by current literature should be made bridged by research that has established causal relationships between viral digital engagement metrics and downstream behavioral outcomes that include purchasing decisions, donation rates, real world participation, and attitudinal change (Tandfonline, 2025). Fourth, since it seems that the advancement of generative AI tools may soon facilitate the creation of personalized, emotional-tuned content, start-ups on the level of an industrial scale, the study of user reactions to AI-generated viral content, such as the perceived authenticity, trust, sharing behavior, etc., is a topic of scholarly urgent significance. Fifth, empirical research on cross-cultural aspects of the possibility of extrapolating the psychological factors of virality observed in empirical studies conducted primarily in Western countries would go a long way in increasing the external validity of the theoretical frameworks underlying the field.

10 Limitations of the Study

This research is limited in a number of ways. to begin with, it is a secondary research project that relies solely on the synthesis of published literature; consequently, results of such a study can only be limited by the capabilities of the sources consulted in terms of geographical coverage and methodological variety. Most empirical studies

focusing on the high-impact of virality have been done in the Western and English-language setting- especially the United States and Europe- which could limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Second, data will not be collected at the primary level, which will not allow the research to form causal links between psychological variables and real behavior of sharing. The scores and relative rankings of the STEPPS indicators discussed in the analysis data section are not measured directly, but summarize self-reported results in the literature, and must be perceived as indicative, not definitive. Third, the reviewed literature is in the range 2012 to 2025, when the platforms were evolving rather quickly. The results of previous research, especially the one performed prior to the emergence of TikTok, can represent the dynamics of the platform that have been since overtaken by the changes in algorithms and behavior. Fourth, the paper fails to reflect the views of content creators, platform engineers, or policy actors whose institutional knowledge can add to the academic literature analyzed in this study.

Conclusion

This paper shows that virality is a psychologically expectable effect of content that triggers high-arousal emotional responses, validates social identities, allows making meaningful self-expression, and suits the structural and algorithmic framework of the host platform. Systematic synthesis of five years worth of peer-reviewed literature as a source of emotional resonance was found to be the most common sharing driver, which supports the arousal-based model by Berger and Milkman (2012) when applied in several independent studies. Analysis of the STEPPS frameworks revealed that the content of challenges scores highest on composite viral potential (82/100) with simultaneous multi-dimensional alignment, and the viral potential of informational content has a structurally constrained weak Public and Trigger score.

To practitioners: emotional specificity has to come first, currency of identity more potent than generic messages; platform native design cannot be compromised and authenticity is the ultimate long-term viral accelerant. To policymakers, the arousal paradox, where high-arousal negative emotions are the most effective virality-driving factors compared to positive ones, necessitates the requirements of an algorithmic transparency and the auditing of platforms. After all, the process of scroll to share is controlled by extremely human processes, emotional, social, identity-based, narratives, and it is control over these processes, rather than technology, that defines viral success in the contemporary attention economy.

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