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Unravelling the Viral Dynamics: Exploring the Spread of Content in the Digital Landscape

[1]Dr. Khursheed Alam, [2]Mr. Anurag Singh,[3]Dr. Deepa Goel,[4]Dr. Sandhya Sharma,[5]Mr. Girish Kumar Singh,[6]Mr. Shailender Kumar

[1]Associate Professor

(Institute of Management Studies,Ghaziabad University Courses Campus)

[2]Assistant Professor

(Institute of Management Studies,Ghaziabad University Courses Campus)

[3]Professor

(Institute of Management Studies,Ghaziabad University Courses Campus)

[4]Associate Professor

(Institute of Management Studies,Ghaziabad University Courses Campus)

[5]Assistant Professor

(Institute of Management Studies,Ghaziabad University Courses Campus)

[6]Assistant Professor

(JIMS, New Delhi)

Abstract The advent of social media platforms in the digital age has catalyzed the emergence of 'viral communication' - the rapid dissemination of social issues, real-life events, and narratives through shared videos, messages, and news across digital channels. This phenomenon thrives on internet sharing via social networks, video-sharing websites, email, and messaging apps. Viral videos and messages have become potent tools for individuals and groups to shed light on lesser-known societal aspects. The past two years have witnessed an influx of viral content ranging from thought-provoking videos addressing real-life issues to entertaining and captivating content. This study explores the dynamics of viral content propagation, examining factors contributing to the widespread dissemination of specific videos, messages, and narratives in the digital realm. By analyzing underlying viral communication mechanisms and patterns, the research aims to provide insights into the interplay between content, user engagement, and digital platforms, enhancing the understanding of this increasingly influential phenomenon.

Keywords: Viral Content, Digital Media, Social Networks, Online Messages, Internet Sharing

Introduction

The digital revolution has transformed global media consumption patterns. With internet-enabled devices and increasing connectivity, consumers can access content of their choice - information, entertainment, or social activities - anytime, anywhere. Online media consumption has grown tremendously, with mobile devices emerging as the preferred medium, particularly smartphones which have seen unprecedented market growth in the last five years. India, as the second-largest internet consumer globally, reflects this trend.

In this era of digitalization, the advent of social media has birthed a 'viral communication' universe. It involves spreading social issues, real incidents, awareness campaigns, or other content of public interest through videos, messages, or news that become popular via internet sharing, typically on social media, video-sharing websites, emails, and messengers.

Historically, large media organizations distributed videos and messages directly to consumers with limited choices - switching channels or turning off the TV. These organizations acted as gatekeepers, determining worthy content for broadcast, influencing popular narratives. However, the rise of online video-sharing sites and social networks has disrupted this dynamic.

Now, many short videos unsuitable for traditional broadcast media are readily available online. User sharing and re-sharing on social sites, blogs, emails, and other platforms have given rise to the 'viral video' phenomenon - videos gaining immense popularity through internet dissemination.

Objectives:

1. To study how digital media has enabled viral communication.
2. To identify the types of viral videos and messages people frequently encounter.
3. To understand people's perceptions towards viral communication.
4. To understand youth involvement in sharing viral videos and messages.

Methodology: The study employs both primary and secondary data collection methods. Primary data is collected through a survey using self-developed closed and open-ended questionnaires, prioritizing field information. The study relies on quantitative and qualitative data collected through descriptive methods.

Sampling

Population of the study

The population of the study comprised four segments of the people.

(i) It involves school and college students of different age groups.
(ii) It involves school and college teachers.
(iii) It involves media professionals, and
(iv) It involves random people, belongs to various professions

Literature Review:

Scholars have explored the types of information shared among people through various lenses. Linkletter et al. (2009) claim the influence of online videos is so strong that certain clips persuade unhealthy risk-taking behavior. Burgess (2008) defines viral videos as clips that become wildly popular through user-led distribution, containing elements appealing to contemporary popular culture, particularly youth.

Heath (1996) conducted survey-based studies on the types of information likely to be shared, based on extremity, valence (positive/negative), and congruence (whether the evoked emotion matches the topic's valence). Moderately surprising rather than extremely surprising information, positive stories on positive topics, and negative stories on negative topics were more prone to sharing.

Nahon and Hemsley (2013) proposed a viral information behavior model identifying three key virality factors: the original messenger's characteristics, the viral information object's characteristics, and the social network or media platform's characteristics through which information spreads.

Berger and Milkman (2012) found content evoking high-arousal emotions like awe, anger, or anxiety is more viral than low-arousal emotions like sadness or contentment. Contrary to popular belief, positive content was more viral than negative.

According to Mohpatra (2013), massive viral communication through social media can be a trendsetter and successful experimentation for good causes. People can use such content to gauge a movement's status and identify its goals, influencing mainstream media coverage.

Marwick and Lewis (2017) examined the role of memes in viral communication, highlighting how their humorous and relatable nature facilitates rapid sharing and cultural transmission. They argued that memes often reflect and shape societal narratives and discourses.

Vosoughi et al. (2018) conducted a large-scale study on Twitter and found that false news stories were more likely to go viral than true stories, primarily due to the novelty and attention-grabbing nature of false information.

Subramanian (2018) highlighted digital influencers' role in driving virality, suggesting content shared by influential individuals or accounts with large followings has a higher likelihood of going viral due to increased exposure and perceived credibility.

Lee et al. (2019) explored the influence of social network structure on content virality, suggesting that content shared within tightly-knit communities or echo chambers is more likely to go viral compared to content shared across diverse networks.

More recent studies have further explored the factors influencing content virality. Peng et al. (2021) identified content characteristics like emotionality, humor, and storytelling as key drivers of viral success on social media. Zhang et al. (2020) found that video content with a strong narrative structure and emotional appeal had a higher likelihood of going viral compared to non-narrative or information-heavy videos.

Sampat et al. (2022) examined the role of social endorsements (likes, comments, shares) in driving virality on platforms like Instagram. Their findings suggest that content with higher early engagement from influential users or accounts is more likely to go viral.

Babić Rosario et al. (2022) studied the impact of platform features and algorithms on viral content propagation. They found that content recommendation systems and personalization algorithms can significantly amplify or hinder the spread of certain types of content across different user segments.

Universe of the study

The universe of the study is the Ghaziabad City, Uttar Pradesh.

After applying purposive sampling, the researchers have selected a total of 100 respondents as the participants for this study.

Table 1 Sample Selection

SN	Source of sample	Frequency
1	School and College students	70
2	School and college teachers	10
3	Media Professionals	10
4	Other Professionals	10
	Total	100

Data analysis and interpretation

The Data gathered for this study is organized, coded and analyzed using Statistical Packages for Social Science (SPSS) where Frequency and Percentage were used to present the result of the study.

S.No	Age (In Years)	%
1	14-17	15
2	17-23	22
3	24-30	30
4	31-40	19
5	Above 41	14

S.No	Gender	%
1	Male	60
2	Female	40

S.No	Occupation	%
1	Students	70
2	Teachers/Professors	10
3	Media Professionals	10
4	Others	10

S.No	Qualification	%
1	10th	17
2	12^{th}	19
3	Graduate	28
4	Post Graduate	25
5	Others	11

Table 2 Showing demographics statistics of the respondents

In table 2 it is revealed that:

Out of all, maximum number of participants belonged to the age group of 24-30 years (30%) and followed by participants of the age group of 17-23 years (22%). 15% are from 14-17 years age group. 31-40 are 19% and only 14% participants are from the above 41 age group.

Male respondents were more (60%) as compared to female respondents (40%).

70% school and college students from different age group have participated in this study. Also, 10% teachers, 10% media professionals and 10% respondents from different profession participated in this study as active respondents.

After analyzing the data, the researcher found that the ratio of graduate respondent is higher in this study i.e. 28% followed by post graduate respondents i.e. 25%. The percentage of 10^{th} and 12^{th} students is 17% and 19 % respectively. 11% respondents are from different other educational background i.e. PhD, Engineering, Medical etc.

Usage

Table 3 Showing percentage of internet users

SN	Response category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	93	93%
2	Sometimes	7	7%
	Total	100	100%

In table 3, it is clearly shown that in this era of digitalization, almost everyone is using or connected to the internet. 93% respondents have confirmed that they use internet frequently and only 7% respondents have said they use internet sometimes.

Table3.1 Showing the percentage of mobile and laptop users

SN	Response category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Mobile	66	66%
2	Laptop	29	29%
3	Both	05	05%
	Total	100	100%

In table 3.1, it is revealed that out of all, 66% respondents prefer mobile phones for using internet and 29 respondents (29%) have said they use internet on laptop or personal computers. 05% respondents said that they use internet on both i.e. mobile as well as laptop.

Table 3.2 Appearance the level of respondents utilizing online entertainment

SN	Response category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	73	73%
2	Sometimes	12	12%
3	No	15	15%
	Total	100	100 %

In table 3.2, it is shown that the number of social media users is very high. 73 respondents **(73%)** have said that they use social media frequently and 12 % have said they are not the frequent users of social media. It is also revealed that out of all 15 respondents **(15%)** are those who do not use any social media platform but have seen viral videos and messages on other websites.

Table 3.3 Appearance the virtual entertainment and talking stages use by respondents

SN	Response category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Facebook	34	34%
2	**X**	10	10%
3	WhatsApp	38	38%
4	Instagram	18	18%
	Total	100	100%

After analyzing the data, it is clearly understood in table 3.3 and chart 2 that Facebook and WhatsApp are the main and favorite social media and chatting platforms for the respondents. Out of all, 34% respondents have said they use Facebook and what's app both very frequently. 38% respondents use what's app very frequently because they feel it is very user friendly. 34% users are the frequent users of Facebook and only 18% respondents have said that they are active on Instagram.

Table 4 Appearance level of respondents seen viral recordings or messages

SN	Response category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	79	79%
2	Sometimes	13	13 %
3	No	8	8%
	Total	100	100%

In table 4, almost every respondent have said that they have seen viral videos. Out of all 79 respondents (79%) have said they get viral videos or messages frequently and 13 respondents (13%) have said they have seen these sometimes. Only 8 (8%) participants said that they have never seen any viral video or messages.

Table 4.1 Appearance level of getting viral items in seven days

SN	Response category	Frequency	Percentage
1	1-3 times	30	36%
2	4-6 times	36	30%
3	7-9 times	24	24%
4	10-12 times	10	10%
	Total	100	100%

In table 4.1, it is revealed that maximum number of respondent i.e. 36% get viral videos or messages 4-6 times in a week through what's app or Facebook, followed by 30% who get viral contents 1-3 times in a week. 24% participants have said they get viral contents very frequently in a week i.e. 7-9 times and 10% participants 10-12 times in a week.

Table 4.2 Appearance advanced stages where members see viral items

SN	Response category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Facebook	27	27%
2	WhatsApp	34	34%
3	You tube	13	13%
4	Instagram	26	26%
	Total	100	100%

Table 4.2 shows that out of all 34 respondents (34%) have said they see viral videos or messages on what's app . 27% participants have said they see viral contents on Facebook. Since,26% see viral videos from Instagram.YouTube is a video website and quite popular among the internet users. After analyzing the data, researcher found that only 26 % respondents go through YouTube for viral contents.

Table 4.3 Appearance respondents who have seen counterfeit viral recordings or messages

SN	Response category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	78	78%
2	Sometimes	13	13%
3	No	9	9%
	Total	100	100%

Table 4.3 shows that almost every respondent have seen viral videos or messages. 78% and 13% respondents have said that they have seen fake viral videos or messages either frequently or sometimes respectively. Only 9 participants (9%) have said that they have never seen any fake viral contents.

Category

Table 5 Table 5 Appearance what sort of viral recordings or message individuals generally get

SN	Response category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Real incidents	30	30%
2	Entertainment	15	15%
3	Corruption	17	17%
4	Fake videos	12	12%
5	Social issues &entertainment	26	26%
	Total	100	100%

In table 5, it is shown that out of all 30 respondents (30%) have said that they generally get viral videos or messages of real incidents. 26% respondents said they get viral videos like social issues, entertainment. 17% revealed that they get messages of real corruption only, followed by 15% who said only Entertainment. 12% have get fake viral videos.

Table 5.1 Showing percentage of respondents who forward viral content

SN	Response category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	32	32%
2	Sometimes	48	48%
3	No	20	20%
	Total	100	100%

In table 5.1, the percentage of participants is shown who forward viral videos or messages when get. Out of all, 48 participants (48%) have said that if they get any viral videos or messages, they do forward them sometimes. 32 participants (32%) have said that if they get any viral videos or messages, they do forward them every time,they forward viral contents through what's app or Facebook. The researcher also found that 20 participants (20%) do not forward any viral videos or messages.

Table 5.2 Showing what kind of viral videos or message people forward most

SN	Response category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Entertainment	13	13%
2	Social issues	31	31%
3	Real incident & Awareness	45	45%
4	National interest	11	11%
5	Total	100	100%

In table 5.2, 45% participants have said that they forward mostly real incidents and awareness videos. 31% have said they prefer to forward viral videos which are related to social issues followed by 11% who forward contents related to national interests. Out of all 13 respondents (13%) have said that they forward only entertainment videos.

Perception

Table 6 showing the perception of respondents towards viral contents

SN	Questions	Strongly agree	Agree	Can't say	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
1	**Do you think that viral videos/messages are authentic?**	22 (22%)	39 (39%)	20 (20%)	15 (15%)	04 (04%)	100 (100%)
2	**Do you think viral videos/messages are bringing any changes in society?**	11 (11%)	47 (47%)	27 (27%)	10 (10%)	5 (5%)	100 (100%)
3	**Do you support viral videos or messages?**	3 (3%)	38 (38%)	36 (36%)	18 (18%)	5 (5%)	100 (100%)
4	**Do you think people are also spreading false information through viral videos/messages?**	32 (36%)	45 (45%)	11 (11%)	9 (9%)	03 (3%)	100 (100%)
5	**Do you feel people are using viral communications for gaining popularity?**	30 (30%)	47 (47%)	13 (13%)	10 (10%)	00	100 (100%)

In table 6 the impression of members about viral recordings and messages are shown. After analyzing the data it is revealed that,

- 39% participants think that the contents shown in viral videos and messages are authentic for them. 20 respondents (20%) have said that they are not sure about viral videos that it is authentic or not. 15% respondents are disagreeing on this question. They do not think that the content shown in viral videos or messages are authentic

and only 22% respondents are very much sure about the content of viral videos and messages. They find it very authentic for them.

- Out of all,47 respondents (47%) have said that they believe viral videos related to social issues and real incidents are bringing change in society. 27% participants have said they are not sure about this. 10% and 9% have said they do not think it is bringing any changes to society and 11% are very much sure about this that viral contents are changing the perception of society and spreading awareness.
- It is also revealed that 38% respondents do support viral videos and messages on the basis of their content. They believe that viral contents on social issues bring changes in society. In addition, 36% participants are neutral on this question as they do not think about this. 18% respondents said that they do not support any viral content.
- Out of all 100 participants (45%) have also said that they think now a day's people are also spreading false information through viral videos and contents. Since these items don't have a specific guardian, they can spread the message effectively with the assistance of virtual entertainment and visit courier.In the last few months, various cases are also seen related to this. During the data collection, various participants said that they have seen several videos and messages that the newly launched Indian currency has a chip inside. Apart from this many respondents also said that they got messages related to any crisis. 11% respondent said they are not sure whether viral contents are spreading false information or not and 9% are disagreeing on this question. They think viral contents are good and they are not spreading any false information.
- The last point of table 6 shows the percentage of participants who thinks people are also using viral content medium to gain popularity. 47% participants have strongly agreed on this point followed by 30% who just agreed on this. 13% respondents are not sure about this and out of all only 10 participants (10%) have said they do not think that people are using this medium for gaining popularity.

Table 6.1 showing percentage of respondents who discuss the content of viral videos and messages with friends or family

SN	Response category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	41	41%
2	Sometimes	35	35%
3	No	24	24%
	Total	100	100%

In table 6.1 it is revealed that almost 100 respondents (41+35+24 = 100) have said that they do discuss the content of viral videos or messages with their friends or family members either always or sometimes. The percentage of these respondents is 41% and 35% respectively. Out of all 24% respondents confirmed that they do not discuss any content of viral videos or messages with anyone.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand why certain content becomes viral. After analyzing data and field experience, the researcher found that people tend to share videos and messages that focus on social issues, real events, corruption, and entertainment. The researcher also noticed that young people are active on digital platforms and play a big role in making content go viral.

39% of participants believe that the contents of viral videos and messages are authentic, while 20% are unsure and 15% disagree. Only 22% are very confident in the authenticity of viral content.

47% of respondents believe that viral videos related to social issues and real incidents are bringing about positive change in society, while 27% are unsure. 10% and 9% respectively do not think viral content is bringing any changes or are very confident that it is changing societal perceptions.

38% of respondents support viral videos and messages based on their content, believing they bring about societal changes, while 36% are neutral and 18% do not support any viral content.

45% of participants believe that false information is being spread through viral videos and contents due to the lack of gatekeepers, with examples cited during data collection. 11% are unsure about this and 9% disagree, believing viral content is not spreading false information.

47% of participants strongly agree and 30% agree that people are using viral content to gain popularity, while 13% are unsure and 10% do not think so.

Regarding devices, most of the 66 participants preferred using smartphones to access the internet. This suggests that smartphones are convenient and easy to use, making them a popular choice. Almost everyone surveyed said they have seen viral videos or messages and support content of a certain genre.

With the rise of digital platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube, it's become easier for people to make content go viral, especially if it's related to a social cause. This aligns with the collective action theory, which suggests that people share content based on shared interests without much effort.

Despite some challenges, participants expressed support for viral content that spreads social information and creates societal change. Their views on viral content are influenced by their social and educational backgrounds.

Overall, the findings of this study support theories such as the diffusion of innovation and collective action theory, which explain how ideas and actions spread through society.

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