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Why Do Ideas Catch On: A Review of the Drivers of Word of Mouth and Viral Marketing

Krishna Kanodia

Bal Bharati Public School Pitampura, New Delhi

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ABSTRACT

This paper combines contemporary marketing literature to examine the factors behind viral content and word of mouth transmission. Applying Jonah Berger's STEPPS model, the paper examines six core principles that determine whether ideas, products, and messages spread through society: Social Currency, Triggers, Emotion, Public visibility, Practical Value, and Stories. Through analysis of empirical research, including the landmark Berger and Milkman (2012) study on New York Times virality, this review identifies the psychological and behavioral mechanisms underlying social transmission. The paper concludes that the most effective viral messages integrate multiple STEPPS elements while maintaining authentic connection with audience values and contextual relevance.

Introduction

The digital age has significantly altered the manner in which information spreads through society. While traditional marketing relied on advertising expenditures and media placements, contemporary success increasingly depends on whether an idea, product, or message gains traction through word of mouth and social sharing. This change shows technological progress alongside economic realities. Word of mouth marketing generates almost 6 trillion dollars in annual global spending (WOMMA) and accounts for 20-50 percent of all purchasing decisions (McKinsey & Company). Further, a word of mouth impression results in five times more sales than a paid impression (WOMMA), and 92 percent of consumers trust referrals more than any other form of advertising (Nielsen). With these stakes, understanding the mechanisms of virality has become very important for marketers, entrepreneurs, policymakers, and organizations seeking to amplify their message.

Jonah Berger is a professor at the Wharton School of Business and has become the leading researcher on this question through his comprehensive investigations into social transmission alongside behavioral psychology. His 2013 book Contagious: Why Things Catch On combines

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years of research into a functional model for understanding virality. The STEPPS structure identifies six psychological and behavioral drivers of word of mouth, which are Social Currency, Triggers, Emotion, Public visibility, Practical Value, and Stories. This review gathers contemporary marketing and psychological literature organized around these six principles. By examining empirical research in each domain, which includes the groundbreaking Berger and Milkman (2012) study on New York Times article virality, this paper identifies common trends in the mechanisms that cause ideas to spread. The paper also identifies important gaps where academic understanding remains incomplete, especially regarding cultural variation, temporal dynamics, interaction effects between principles, and the ethical dimensions of engineered virality.

Social Currency: Identity, Status, and Self-Presentation

The primary principle of social currency recognizes that people care about how they appear to others and actively curate information they share to project favorable self-images. People share content that makes them appear smart, cool, well-informed, or entertaining. Berger and Milkman (2012) found that practical utility and explicit social currency cues significantly predict article virality. This principle operates through several distinct psychological processes.

1. Exclusive or surprising information confers status on the sharer while showing them to be plugged-in, knowledgeable, and sophisticated. When a person discovers an interesting fact or amusing observation before their peers, sharing it serves multiple functions simultaneously because it shows their access to novel information and signals their judgment in recognizing its interest value and places them as an information source within their social network. Berger observes that people disproportionately share stories and facts that make them seem clever or entertaining.

2. The authenticity of social currency sharing is of vital importance. Content that allows sharing without appearing explicitly narcissistic or self-promotional performs better than obvious self-aggrandizement. Research in social psychology shows that humorous self-deprecation, humble-bragging with subtle cultural references, and sharing that emphasizes group identity instead of individual superiority generate more shares than direct boasting. The sharer must balance projecting positive attributes with maintaining an appearance of authenticity and modesty.

3. The social context and audience composition influence sharing decisions significantly. An individual is more likely to share content among friends who will appreciate its nuance, understand its references, and reciprocate with comparable content. Broadcasting

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to large, heterogeneous audiences typically requires content with broader appeal, whereas narrowcasting to small groups permits more specialized or sophisticated humor.

The challenge for marketers lies in creating content that genuinely reflects the audience's self-perception and aspirational identity while encouraging them to share it with their networks. When marketing messages are congruent with how audiences wish to be perceived, sharing becomes a form of identity construction instead of just advertising.

Triggers: Environmental Cues and Top-of-Mind Awareness

The trigger principle recognizes a fundamental fact about human communication (Berger & Iyengar, 2013). People discuss whatever is top of mind at a given moment (Berger & Heath, 2005). Ideas that are frequently triggered by environmental cues remain accessible to memory and consequently receive more mention in conversation (Berger & Heath, 2005). Research has indicated that products with frequent environmental associations generate significantly more word of mouth discussion than those without such cues (Berger & Iyengar, 2013). The mechanism operates through simple cognitive accessibility: when a cue in the environment brings a product, idea, or brand to mind, the person is more likely to discuss it in subsequent conversation (Berger & Heath, 2005; Berger & Iyengar, 2013).

Hershey's classic application of this principle showcases its power (Berger, 2013). The company linked Kit Kat to coffee, and within twelve months, sales increased almost 40 percent (Berger, 2013). Coffee is an effective trigger because many people consume it multiple times daily (Berger & Heath, 2005). Every instance of drinking coffee reminds the consumer of Kit Kat, making it more likely that the person will mention Kit Kat in conversation or consider purchasing it (Berger & Iyengar, 2013). Similarly, peanut butter naturally triggers thoughts of jelly, and seasonal patterns trigger associations with hot chocolate in winter or lemonade in summer (Berger & Heath, 2005).

However, the trigger principle contains important nuances that limit its application.

1. Trigger frequency must be genuine instead of artificial. Environmental cues that seem naturally integrated into consumption routines generate heightened effects compared to forced associations that interrupt normal behavior.
2. Trigger quality is essential. A cue unique to a particular brand outperforms a generic environmental signal. A distinctive jingle, color, or contextual association creates enhanced recall compared to ambiguous references shared across multiple brands.
3. Saturation effects emerge when high-frequency triggers lose their novelty and fade into background noise. Marketing strategies that embed triggers into consumers' daily lives

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through distinctive jingles, unique colors, or contextual associations integrate this principle effectively.

Emotion: Arousal, Valence, and Content Virality

The relationship between emotion and virality extends beyond simple positivity or negativity. Research indicates that physiological arousal, instead of valence alone, powers sharing behavior. Berger and Milkman (2012) analyzed New York Times articles and found that content evoking high-arousal positive emotions (awe) was significantly likelier to be shared compared to content evoking low-arousal emotions (contentment or sadness). Importantly, the research also showed that high-arousal negative emotions (anger and anxiety) prompted sharing to a greater extent than positive emotions alone. An increase in awe by one standard deviation enhanced the likelihood of content being shared by 30 percent.

This finding challenges the common assumption that positive emotions are most effective for marketing. Instead, the data indicates that emotional activation itself, whether positive or negative in valence, increases behavioral engagement. Awe inspires admiration and the desire to share beautiful or grand experiences with others. Anger inspires active discourse and the impulse to share as a means of mobilizing others toward action. In contrast, sadness is a physiologically deactivating emotion that reduces social engagement and sharing behavior. Excitement and joy, while positive, show variable effects; moderate happiness sometimes reduces sharing compared to high-arousal states.

The process appears to be that high-arousal emotions increase general arousal and social engagement, making people prone to discuss and share content. Platform-specific research indicates that posts eliciting awe experience up to 30 percent higher shares on TikTok compared to other emotions. The literature highlights an important nuance. The specific emotion counts for little compared to its intensity. However, harmony between emotion and brand message is essential. A brand attempting to generate awe through unrelated emotional content will fail to create lasting results. Furthermore, emotional resonance varies substantially by audience that which provokes awe in one demographic may provoke skepticism in another. This suggests that targeted emotional strategies, tailored to audience psychology and values, are far more effective than blanket emotional appeals.

Public Visibility: Observability and Social Proof

The public visibility principle recognizes that ideas, behaviors, and products that are observable spread faster than equivalent offerings that remain private. Public visibility operates through two complementary mechanisms. It provides social proof that others have adopted something, and it creates visibility that prompts discussion and imitation.

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Berger observes that products worn visibly, such as Apple headphones or branded apparel, generate more discussion than functionally equivalent products used privately (Berger, 2013). The white earbuds became iconic because they were visible in public, creating a visual marker that signaled both product quality and brand membership (Berger, 2013). This observability created a feedback loop (Berger, 2013). Visible adoption signaled the product's popularity which prompted others to adopt it (Berger, 2013). This increased visibility further (Berger, 2013). Social proof operates simultaneously (Berger, 2013). Seeing others use something signals its popularity, reliability, and value (Berger, 2013). This creates what researchers term a cascade effect where initial adopters make the product visible, which attracts additional adopters, which further increases visibility and accelerates adoption (Bikhchandani et al., 1992; Berger, 2013).

The marketing literature emphasizes that making a product or behavior public, whether through intrinsic design features or through social mechanisms such as public commitments or testimonials, amplifies its spread. However, visibility alone is insufficient for success. The visible element must be intrinsic to the product's value proposition and not feel artificially imposed. Conspicuous consumption that appears inauthentic or performative undermines the effect, particularly among sophisticated audiences. Additionally, the context of visibility matters substantially. A visible behavior in relevant settings generates more significant impact than visibility in neutral contexts. Fitness trackers are more socially impactful in a gym environment than on the beach, and branded apparel is more visible in professional settings than in private home contexts.

Practical Value and Utility: Information That Helps

People share information they believe will benefit their social circles. This positions themselves as helpful and informed. Research shows that practical utility is one of the most prominent drivers of content sharing, especially in professional and service contexts. Berger and Milkman (2012) found that articles with explicit practical tips were shared more frequently than comparable articles without actionable guidance.

This principle operates through multiple psychological motivations.

1. Sharing useful information serves a prosocial function. The sharer presents themselves as someone who cares about their audience's wellbeing and has access to valuable resources.
2. When narrowcasting to individuals or small groups, motivations change from self-presentation toward helping others solve real problems. In these contexts, people typically share information most relevant to the recipient's needs instead of content that maximizes the sharer's status.

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Content characteristics that maximize experiential value include specificity, actionability, and immediate implementability. How-to content, step-by-step guides, checklists, and templates perform strongly as shareable content because they solve actual problems or teach useful skills. The key to shareable practical content is specificity and concreteness. Specific, actionable guidance that readers can implement immediately earns saves and shares because it delivers genuine and tangible value. Generic advice lacking actionable steps performs poorly because recipients cannot translate the content into behavior change.

In the digital age, every share of content represents a trusted, personal endorsement delivered to a new audience at zero additional marketing cost. Word of mouth has historically been the most powerful form of marketing and shareable content is how word of mouth scales across large audiences. Every person who shares content becomes a marketer working on behalf of the original message.

Stories: Narrative Transportation and Memorable Messaging

Stories convey information through narrative structures that engage multiple areas of the brain and produce substantially higher memorability than factual presentation alone (Aaker, n.d.; Learnit, 2025). Research suggests that stories are up to 22 times more memorable than facts alone (Aaker, n.d.). This superiority emerges because stories engage cognitive, emotional, and sensory areas of the brain simultaneously, creating richer neural encoding that produces more durable memory traces (Learnit, 2025). Stories work through narrative transportation, a psychological process whereby audiences become immersed in a narrative and forget their skepticism and integrate the story's themes and values into their own worldview (Green & Brock, 2000).

Research in narrative psychology indicates that stories featuring clear protagonists, conflicts, and resolutions prove far more memorable and persuasive compared to lists of facts or abstract arguments (Green & Brock, 2000; Escalas, 2004). Stories also embed values and lessons with greater effect than explicit instruction (Heath & Heath, 2007). The most effective advertising integrates emotion alongside narrative (Binet & Field, 2007). Studies indicate that ads with purely emotional content perform nearly double (31 percent versus 16 percent) compared to those containing only rational content (Binet & Field, 2007). Furthermore, narrative transportation produces long-lasting effects on attitudes and intentions, significantly enhancing the persuasive power of marketing messages (Green & Brock, 2000; Wiedmann & Karampournioti, 2017).

The synergy between utility and stories appears in marketing campaigns that combine how-to guides with customer testimonies or personal narratives. Stories that convey useful wisdom

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through narrative arc make the information memorable and emotionally engaging. However, stories without everyday relevance can feel like mere entertainment, while purely utilitarian content may lack the emotional resonance needed to motivate sharing. The most effective approach integrates these dual dimensions: a story that teaches a useful lesson through narrative, making the information two-fold: memorable and actionable.

Research extends narrative transportation theory to visual and multi-modal advertising formats, examining how visual narratives engage audiences (Van Laer et al., 2014; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010). Visual storytelling relies on narrative coherence and vivid imagery to convey complex sequences without heavy textual reliance (Gerrig, 1993; Escalas, 2004).Consumers experience higher cognitive fluency when information is presented in a logically connected, causally coherent sequence (Reber et al., 2004; Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009). Factors such as visual consistency, character identification, and emotional arcs enhance narrative transportation and lower consumer resistance (Green & Brock, 2000; Dessart, 2018; Van Laer et al., 2014).

Discussion: Integration, Gaps, and Future Directions

The STEPPS model gathers core drivers of virality with substantial empirical support. Still, research indicates important limitations and gaps that warrant discussion.

1. Interaction effects between STEPPS dimensions remain underexplored. While individual elements are well-studied, investigation into social currency amplifying emotional effect, utility being enhanced by narrative design, or triggers interacting with emotional arousal remains limited. The most viral content likely operates through synergy among multiple STEPPS elements, but existing literature provides limited guidance on these interactions functioning in execution.
2. Cultural and demographic variation in these drivers requires substantial further investigation. Most foundational research on virality was conducted in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic societies (WEIRD countries). The applicability of these findings to diverse cultural contexts remains unclear. Different cultures may weight emotion, social currency, and public visibility differently based on values emphasizing collectivism versus individualism, different norms regarding self-promotion, and varying comfort levels with overt marketing.
3. The temporal dynamics of virality deserve comprehensive analysis. Research indicates that factors driving initial rapid spread may differ from those sustaining long-term engagement or converting viral attention into meaningful behavior change. Understanding the evolution of virality over time, the distinction between sustained adoption and momentary attention, and methods to design for persistence instead of fleeting novelty requires longitudinal research.

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4. The ethical implications of engineered virality warrant expanded academic focus. Inducing awe or anger artificially, without genuine origin, raises questions regarding manipulation and social responsibility. If organizations systematically engineer emotional triggers to drive sharing regardless of message authenticity or societal value, this can erode public trust and contribute to information fragmentation. The tension between viral effectiveness and authentic communication deserves sustained exploration.
5. The distinction between virality and long-term results requires clarification. Viral content often fades rapidly. Understanding what translates viral moments into lasting behavior change, sustained engagement, or meaningful adoption remains an important open question.

Conclusion

Ideas catch on when they sync with human psychology and social needs. The STEPPS model identifies six evidence-based principles: content that confers social currency, ideas triggered by environmental cues, messages evoking high-arousal emotions, behaviors that are publicly visible, information providing utility, and messages conveyed through narrative transportation. Ideas that integrate multiple STEPPS elements while maintaining authentic connection with audience values spread more effectively than those relying on single processes.

Word-of-mouth marketing prompts critical economic and social outcomes. With word-of-mouth recommendations improving marketing effectiveness by 54 percent and generating 5 times more sales than paid impressions, understanding virality holds profound significance. The research gathered in this review provides organizations with actionable principles for creating content and campaigns that spread. Still, virality is neither guaranteed nor purely manipulable through formula. The most successful applications of these principles combine strategic understanding of psychological drivers with authentic communication grounded in genuine value.

As the digital landscape evolves with new platforms and modalities continuously altering the way ideas spread, the core principles identified in this literature review remain robust. The fundamental psychology behind social transmission persists even as media channels change. Future research should expand understanding of STEPPS elements interacting, varying across cultural contexts, and applying ethically and responsibly. For practitioners, the evidence stands: understanding why ideas catch on is the first step toward ensuring that important messages break through the noise and create lasting change.

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