

The Psychology of Virality: The Driving Mechanisms Spreading Performing Arts Content on Digital Platforms

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Abstract

There has been a rapid growth of digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts which has radically altered the distribution of performing arts content. This rise has enabled dance shows, excerpts of theater, spoken word poetry and other music works to find a worldwide audience within hours. Algorithms and other recommendation systems can be accredited to this rise. Recent interdisciplinary work, however, argues that virality depends as much on psychology as it does on technological structures.

This paper aims to investigate the psychological factors that make performance arts content virally successful. It will evaluate mechanisms such as emotional contagion, social proof, novelties, identity signals, and the attention economy.

Based on literature from psychology, consumer behavior, communication, and marketing, the paper assesses how each psychological mechanism may influence viewer, engagement and sharing practices. The research does not consider algorithms as autonomous causes of virality. Instead it argues that they principally empower existing psychological human mechanisms by preferentially showcasing user engagement levels with each other content's performance. Hence the process of virality appears to result from the interplay of psychological structures and those recommenders as are the technology of media mediation in our time. Understanding this interaction can offer meaningful information for performers, digital marketers and other content providers who want to improve user engagement in this highly competitive digital sphere.

I. Introduction

Short-form digital media platforms have transformed the creation, consumption and dissemination of performing arts which previously relied on venue access, broadcast platforms or critiques from arts critics and publications. Now individual performing artists can achieve widespread fame, almost overnight, through a single post on platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts.¹ Short videos depicting dance routines, live musical performances, short theatrical scenes or spoken word poetry recitation may be shared hundreds of millions of times in a matter of weeks. Digital media offers unprecedented accessibility to performing arts and alters patterns of artistic consumption.

These developments have occurred amidst increasing concerns about a competitive attention economy. On any given day a user is subjected to an unprecedented volume of online content. Within such an environment characterised by attention deficits and fragmenting attention, to hold audience interest, performers must engage viewers immediately, ideally within a handful of seconds lest viewers immediately disengage. Performance on a digital platform, therefore, must cater to the same psychological mechanisms that encourage online audiences to consume, engage with, and ultimately share digital content. Digital marketing has, therefore, begun an integral extension of an artistic career where audience reception of artistic work depends in no small measure on audience psychological dynamics.

Despite the colossal amounts of performative arts-related content uploaded online each day, just a minute portion gains considerable traction. This disparity gives rise to a simple question: What differentiates performing art viral phenomena from unremarkable work? While a great deal is written about how algorithms influence what we see, this only partially addresses why popular performing art is shared. Recommendation algorithms rely upon established, successful user behaviour patterns to identify such content. Rather the focus here shifts towards those consistent behavioural processes that encourage people to share performing art as well as those that can drive success for 'real-time' internet phenomena. A combination of behavioural psychology, social media marketing, communication studies as well as consumer psychology have illustrated a number of psychological triggers that promote engagement and sharing of online content including

(i) Emotional contagion, whereby those viewing highly-rising emotions are driven to reproduce them

¹ <https://substreammagazine.com/2026/02/how-social-media-short-videos-are-changing-music-discovery/>

- (ii) Social proof, where observers attribute value to content in accordance with the number of other users showing concern (likes, comments and shares)
- (iii) Novelty, unusualness or uniqueness
- (iv) Novelty of approach whereby we value those who have the innovative perspective to impart new meaning or insights into a subject
- (v) Identity signalling, whereby sharing reinforces our own personal values, interests, and social identifications
- (vi) Instrumental and value expressiveness. It is assumed that the conditions of the attention economy whereby a limited consumer attention become more fragmented, intensifies this competition and rewards those contents capable of producing immediate, psychological responses.

Accordingly this study addresses the research for the psychological mechanisms that influence the virality of performing art content distributed on digital platforms. The study draws from a multi-disciplinary range of sources from behaviour psychology, consumer research, communications scholarship and digital marketing literature. The paper critically evaluates the intersection of those psychological mechanisms with algorithmic systems to better understand online performing art viral outcomes. It also positions the phenomena of digital performance, as a conjunction of psychological inputs and their amplification by technology. This study suggests that the mechanisms of online sharing can help explain what leads to the rapid spread of certain performing art forms through contemporary internet-based platforms.

II. Literature Review

Emotional Contagion

The most widely cited explanation for the sharing of online content is emotional contagion. This is the psychological process of unconsciously adopting and transmitting the emotions felt by others². Online content sharing and consumption are primarily determined by emotion as users' engagement with online material is often influenced by feelings that influence whether it is simply observed or shared. Berger and Milkman (2012) explain that emotions evoking a state of high-arousal, whether positive or negative, are significantly more likely to become viral compared to neutral ones.³ High-arousal emotions like awe, amusement, excitement and inspiration lead to high physiological arousal that encourages individuals to engage in social behaviors such as sharing content with others.

This is an integral part within the performing arts where emotions are crucial to the form of expression. Following an exciting performance at the theatre, the standing ovation, the outpouring of emotions from an intense monologue, the surprises of a flash mob, the joyous thrill of a musical piece are all intended to create strong emotional experiences within a viewer who shares the feelings of the performer and, therefore, the content. Comments relating to a performance in terms of how inspiring or amazing and thrilling it was and so forth are very common. Viewers share these performances not because they appreciate the art but for their desire to create the emotion in another person, or the public ownership of a particular feeling by publicly associating themselves with this emotion.

Emotion is, however, not the sole determining factor of a piece going viral as excessive and intensely negative emotion, or complicated emotional performances, may hinder people's interaction with content. This is particularly true in a very quick paced environment where users search for immediate satisfaction from consuming and interacting with certain content. Emotional contagion, therefore, is best seen as a necessary but not a sufficient condition to go viral.

Social Proof

Social proof describes the behavioral tendency of people to believe that information is correct and credible based on the fact that it is widely available and believed.⁴ Based upon a combination of normative social influence and the bandwagon effect, it indicates that when people can perceive high figures of likes, comments, shares and reposts, they interpret this as something that is popular and therefore, valid and true. Humans, as is generally accepted, are inherently lazy in terms of their information gathering process. When confronted with a mass amount of content, people rely on visible signals, such as likes and shares, to decide which content they are going to actively engage with.

Performing arts are susceptible to social proof, given the subjective nature of art. A dance performance, with thousands of likes, receives millions of views and is seen as more worthwhile to watch than an equally

² <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9337870/>

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345698319_Emotion_and_Virality_What_Makes_Online_Content_Go_Viral

⁴ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10363943/>

compelling performance with very few likes. This creates a cycle of sharing, a cascade in which every new spectator that shares a piece will further encourage someone else. This increases the popularity and therefore perceived value of the content is accelerated through recommendations within networks as well as via recommendation algorithms that will prioritize this widely watched content. Social proof is a less effective explanation for the original engagement with and creation of the piece.

Yet, people can simply believe that a work is of high value because other people feel that it is, even if the subjective value is not high and rather it is the amount of views that encourages engagement rather than artistic merit. High social proof in relation to viewing and sharing a certain work does not mean that the work has artistic merit or is original, only that it has gained popularity through a number of users that are driven by the beliefs of many other users. As a consequence, social proof is much stronger in relation to explaining the mechanism of increased shares of performing arts than to the initiation of original interaction from the viewer.

Novelty and Surprise

Another factor that influences a viewer's desire to share is the element of novelty. Human beings are oriented to stimuli that differ greatly from familiar stimuli. Humans perceive that there is always opportunity for learning and adaptation, and therefore, the human brain always looks out for and perceives any change occurring within its current environment. Thus, unusual performances, surprising elements, or unfamiliar forms make humans stop and watch any content which differs from previous media, as well as watch the whole movie until the very end to receive an adequate explanation to solve the problem presented. Performing arts commonly exploit novelty by innovative choreography, different staging, hybridization of genres, and surprise audience participation.

Dance performances may take place in surprising locations, a theatrical piece may offer interactive elements, music may mix and match traditional and modern styles, or performers may create unusual sonic landscapes through innovative techniques. These examples show how novelty does not have a singular definition and is dynamic in nature, based on individual choices and preferences. Further, novelty makes the viewer curious and it increases the likelihood that they will continue to seek out any potential explanation for these discrepancies, thus providing an "information gap".

Despite the strength of novelty in creating engagement and subsequent shares, people will eventually get accustomed to anything even if novelty is always present. New, bizarre and novel forms are already widely presented within the social network therefore reducing their impact in gaining an audience. This should therefore be balanced with familiarity to achieve significant engagement with most of the society.

Identity Signaling

The motivation for sharing online content not only lies in its inherent qualities or characteristics that appeal to individuals, but also in what certain content communicates about themselves to other individuals. Identity signaling theory asserts that sharing online content enables individuals to articulate aspects of their personal values, their cultural affiliation, interests, and group memberships⁵. Therefore, sharing online content can be considered an act of self-presentation, used to articulate and control how the sharer is portrayed among others.

Performing arts are particularly prevalent in this process due to the fact that one's preference can also be interpreted as representing one's values and culture⁶. Sharing a Broadway musical can be seen as a means of signaling high culture interest, while sharing a cultural ballet may be a form of stating affiliation with their native culture. K-Pop, spoken word poetry or alternative music are means for people to signal affiliation with a cultural sub-group.

Performing arts are extremely susceptible to this behavior as well, since preference is often also related to personal values. People share articles and information which states to their peers that they are part of and value a certain sub-culture, such as belonging to a fan group of a particular group of musicians and therefore share their music and content. Sharing about a certain piece of performance can therefore not be solely related to viewing the performance but it can also be related to stating the sharer's persona in the society at that very time.

The Attention Economy

The attention economy conceptualization of human communication suggests that there is a finite amount of information available to us but that the sheer volume of communication, both online and offline, exceeds our attention⁷. The most prevalent digital environments are those characterized by high density and fragmentation of

⁵ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360346437_Models_of_Identity_Signaling

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/387515443_Cultural_identity_and_its_influence_on_performing_arts_Archetypes_reflections_interpretations

⁷ <https://academic.oup.com/grurint/article/74/8/724/8221317>

information which requires increased vigilance and attentional demands from users⁸. Platforms encourage audiences to spend more time interacting with their applications as they tend to favor content that immediately captures the eye and keeps the viewer's attention throughout.

The advent of short-term video platforms especially accelerated this phenomenon as audiences scroll through feeds and creators do not have long before people become bored. As a result, in the performing arts, highly successful performing arts content often begins visually or acoustically strong for as long as possible before the performance builds up in complexity. Musicals often begin with highly emotive songs and thrilling choreographed routines, theatre works with bold acting or shocking visual presentations, and composers would be keen to include a strong melody or a surprising climax in the beginning of a piece of music.

The Role of Algorithms

Although it is easy to view algorithms as the "prime mover" of virality, literature on the topic has often depicted it more as a passive responder rather than an active creator of popular content. Recommendation algorithms analyze cues of prior user engagement such as duration watched, completion rates, likes, comments and shares. It also takes into consideration prior engagement with the producer of the content to identify and propagate content that is likely to generate engagement. Only then it confirms what humans respond to. The two processes complement each other such that psychologically pleasing content has a higher probability of getting viral, while algorithms help to reach a vast audience that will later contribute to a higher engagement for those works that people initially respond to. However, there is still the concern that over time this interaction will favor contents that are psychologically stimulating. It may lead to the marginalization of more intellectual and artistic performances that do not trigger an immediate audience response. This phenomenon will also eventually depend on the shifting nature of how different platform algorithms operate.

III. Discussion and Analysis

Research suggests that virality is the sum of multiple psychological, emotional, and cognitive factors compounded and then further amplified by the nature of digital recommendation systems. This is true across different online media platforms for performing arts. Performing arts are inherently designed to engage people's emotions. They well suit the properties of popular media platforms such as dance, music, and theatre, which all include sensory as well as emotional stimulation which leads to more readily shared, widely viewed performances.

Of all these psychological drivers that facilitate the virality of online entertainment for performing arts, emotional contagion has the largest and most impactful effect with no other mechanism more able to engage the audience and lead to shareable content. Unlike informational material for example with performances, people do something at least twice. They receive it and then they feel it⁹. Performing art is designed to incite a reaction and in highly activated states such as ecstatic highs and depressing lows, people seek to share this to friends by forwarding videos. It therefore spreads messages beyond simply their friends and family. People are often observed posting comments on performance snippets such as poignant monologues or rousing pieces, asking friends to "come and watch with me". Emotional participation becomes social participation.

Platform behaviour confirms that those more prone to generating higher levels of engagement also create stronger levels of personal interest that can be leveraged. Many popular shortform content sites often score higher when the content produced holds the users attention for longer periods. Platforms such as TikTok and its success is evident in its above average engagement rates, YouTube's shorts and even instagram's stories/ reels aim for higher views and longer watch times. All these are supported by algorithms which prioritize good performance metric results such as continued engagement and high viewership, which is increased. This is where the viewing content has provided a deeper, more meaningful emotional connection for the user, allowing it to draw a larger potential audience with increased likelihood of repeated engagement through the shared experience and the strong emotions displayed.

But while high emotional engagement would cause one to think all artists performing art are as viral as each other, there are other factors that have a role to play as well. In the production of performance, often when considering distribution into such short forms, format creators turn content such as performances into smaller, even fragmented content with each taking a slightly different approach to engage the viewer. For example, while a 50-minute classical recording of the Nutcracker wouldn't be likely to achieve any viral spread, a clip from Nutcracker which

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/392646823_Scrolling_Clicking_Thinking_The_New_Psychology_of_the_Digital_Native

⁹ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2676782/>

goes behind-the-scenes revealing a blooper is far more likely to result in a lot of social spread. It highlights a better perspective, where sharing of social interactions has a higher engagement than sharing of audience perspective. This reinforces both social contagion and social proof into one!

The most potent type of interaction for causing content to “go viral” would therefore involve format interactivity. Dance moves used to recreate original popular songs or challenge prompts, for example, further opens audience consumption to active creation for the performer's audience. This changes their roles from passive consumers to active creators and therefore more likely to share. This enhances individual user-agent participation and increases the overall total of people who engaged in the original popular works of art by allowing those to interact to signify their identification to specific groups. This would allow those who engage more readily with the original artist to have more social proof to their online persona. This, however, leads to creators being dependent upon consumers.

Algorithms, without emotion-provoking, are unlikely to gain proof of the significance of any content due to how algorithms' learning is guided. The most emotionally stimulating performance may never be widely recognized without amplification by an algorithm toward more eyes-on-target reach. Virality is created from mutually reinforced relationships between the public's behaviors and technological systems.

Even though psychological explanations are persuasive, an algorithm could over-simplify when reducing the virality of performances solely to user behavior. Other factors that can have an impact and allow content to be spread is how or who is sharing (celebrity influences/endorsers, collaborative projects), whether or how promotion is occurring (pay-to play advertising and product launches) and when a work is delivered to the audience. Algorithms and platform policies that can either promote or censure content also limit the predictability of the psychological factors that allow for such amplification in the first place. Moreover, the very measurements that people commonly equate as virality - views, likes, shares, the general measure of engagement - should not be considered equivalent to artist quality because the goals of most popular platforms focus on optimal use which maximizes attention over actual aesthetic value. This shows how hyperactive content that provides immediate stimuli can perform better and rise higher than a conceptually complex or artistically mature piece that involves more focused mental engagement. This is what leads to artistic adjustments that enhance desirability for algorithms. Therefore, the most complete account would view virality as an ongoing cycle of both predictable psychological tendencies and the emergent properties of technological mediums.

IV. Conclusion

The research regarding virality of content and the psychology behind it was aimed to respond to the question, “What are the psychological mechanisms influencing the virality of performing arts content on digital platforms?”. Various literature on the topics including literature on psychology, consumer behaviour, communication and digital marketing disciplines, identified that it was impossible to describe the virality with only a factor. Rather the virality resulted from the interaction of a cluster of psychological mechanisms governing viewer behaviour and amplified by platform recommendation algorithms.

Our study confirmed that emotional contagion was the most powerful predictor sharing behaviour because performing arts content featuring high arousal negative/positive emotions (e.g., excitement, inspire, and humor) evoked people to share content and engage with each other through their networks. Social proof also helped amplify sharing-behaviour through increasing desirability of performer and performance. Novelty has a strong ability to attract attention by interrupting people's habit of scrolling, while identity signalling encourages people sharing their content to communicate their sense of belonging, to reinforce identity and communities. These psychological mechanisms worked in the context of a competitive attention economy, requiring immediate response from the audience.

Nonetheless, psychological factors, while significant, alone were insufficient. A platform's recommendation algorithm accelerated virality by favouring content with high-performed social media indicators such as high viewing time, completion rates and shared numbers. Algorithms reinforce the effects that people are more inclined to interact with others. By strengthening natural tendencies, people would be encouraged to repeat their behaviours in the cycle of viewing. Rather than replacing humans' psychic mechanism, algorithms reinforced those mechanisms that were already at play to increase popularity of performances. So, virality was considered a synergistic consequence of the both two phenomena in a mutually influencing dynamic.

These findings suggested some significant practical implications for several actors. Firstly, it enables performing artists to understand viewer's psyches and create a better digital presentation and engagement without undermining artistic expression. Secondly, this review can make content managers and marketers recognize the role of the audience's emotion, social proof, novelty, and identity as crucial in driving sharing-behaviour which can improve their strategy in social platforms. Nevertheless, it needs to pay attention to avoid too extreme focus on algorithm

optimization. Algorithms, while instrumental, should not overlook their potential effects on artistic value and expression.

Several opportunities for future research emerged from this study. As digital platforms and AI continuously evolve and become more dynamic, future research could explore how new technology such as personalization algorithms, AI agents, and virtual/augmented reality might influence user psychology affecting virality.¹⁰ Comparative analysis and examination across different performing arts, genres and cultures can test whether these psychological mechanisms hold up in the long run. In addition, this review provided us with broader perspectives for understanding people's psychology of virality for more practical guidance to digital content design and for a greater insight to the cultural exchange through the Digital Era.

Bibliography

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¹⁰ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S277250302400032X>