

Trends & Hypes in Social Media: Mechanisms of Accelerated Global Dissemination

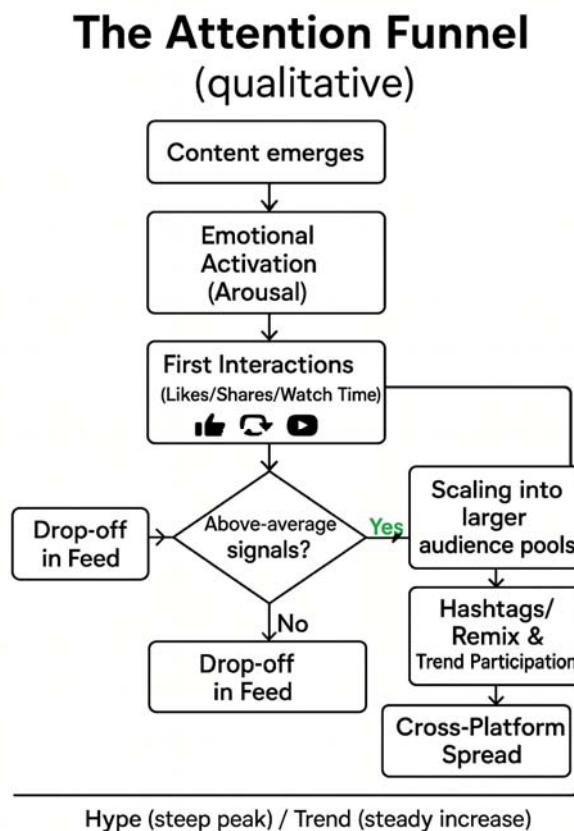
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Introduction: What is the difference between a "trend" and a "hype"?

In communication research, a trend refers to an above-average rapid and broad adoption or dissemination of information, a meme, or a practice within networks. A hype is a special form of this: a short-term, extremely accelerated, and disproportionate amount of attention, sometimes with speculative expectation effects.

Both phenomena are based on social contagion, information cascades, and algorithmic selection & amplification. Classical diffusion approaches (Rogers) are supplemented by more recent evidence on the structure of virality and attention cycles (Goel et al., 2016; Asur et al., 2011; Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2019).

Why this is important: For practice and regulation, understanding the accelerating factors is crucial to make reach more predictable, communication more responsible, and risks more controllable (e.g., misinformation). It is empirically proven that false news spreads further, faster, and deeper than true news – primarily through human sharing, not through bots (Vosoughi et al., 2018).



1. The Phenomenon of Viral Speed

In a digital landscape saturated with information, the ability to create content that is not just consumed, but actively shared, has become the decisive currency for brands, organizations, and individuals.

Digital communication has fundamentally changed the way we receive and share information. Social networks have become the main channels for information exchange, and a user's decision to share content with their network is a complex psychological act. It is far more than just a click; it is a form of self-representation, a means of social interaction, and often an emotional reaction to the consumed content. From the perspective of communication psychology, sharing content is an act of social currency.

We share what makes us look good in a certain light, what underlines our values and beliefs, or what helps us to connect with others.

Marketing psychology has long recognized the importance of emotions in influencing consumer behavior. Purchase decisions are rarely purely rational; they are significantly influenced by feelings such as trust, joy, or nostalgia. This insight can be directly applied to the "purchase behavior" of content, where the "currency" is attention and the "transaction" is the share button. Scientific studies show that content that evokes strong emotional reactions has a significantly higher probability of going viral. However, not all emotions are equally

effective in this regard. The decisive component, according to current research, is physiological arousal – the excitement or activation that an emotion triggers in us.

In an increasingly digitized world, social media is shaped by a flood of trends and hypes that spread globally with breathtaking speed. Social media has fundamentally changed the way information and trends emerge and spread. Previously, it was traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers that acted as gatekeepers and determined which topics reached a broad public. Today, anyone can potentially trigger a global trend. A single video, a meme, or a hashtag can reach millions of people within hours and spark a global conversation.

This acceleration is not solely due to technological networking. Rather, it is a complex interplay of deeply rooted human needs and the sophisticated algorithms of the platforms that create this breeding ground for viral phenomena. To understand the dynamics of trends and hypes in social media, we must therefore deal with both the human psyche and the architecture of the digital world.

1.1 Theoretical Framework: Psychological Foundations

Need Satisfaction through Social Media

People use social media primarily to satisfy fundamental psychological needs. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, these motivations can be categorized as:

- **Physiological Needs:** Use for health promotion and well-being
- **Safety Needs:** Striving for physical, mental, and financial security
- **Social Needs:** Belonging, acceptance, and connection with others
- **Individual Needs:** Self-esteem, recognition, and status
- **Self-actualization:** Publishing successes and personal development

Neurological Foundations of Social Media Use

The use of social media activates the brain's reward system. Positive attention in the form of likes, comments, and shares triggers the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward. Functional magnetic resonance imaging studies show that viewing content with many likes triggers activity in brain regions responsible for reward processing, social cognition, imitation, and attention.

Psychological Motivators for Social Media Use

Motivator	Psychological Need	Example
Self-presentation	Individual need	Maintained profile, curated content
Social comparison	Belonging	Benchmarking against peers
Information seeking	Security	News, trends, knowledge
Entertainment	Stimulation	Humor, creative content
Connection	Belonging	Networking, relationship management

2. The Psychology Behind Sharing: Why We Can't Help It

Human behavior in social media is not random. It is guided by fundamental psychological needs and cognitive processes. The following factors are decisive for the rapid spread of trends.

2.1 Social Proof and the Need for Belonging: The Power of the Masses

Humans are social beings. We have a deep need for belonging and social acceptance. One of the strongest psychological forces at work in social media is so-called social proof. This principle states that we orient our behavior and decisions on what others do, especially in uncertain or new situations. When we see many people participating in a trend, be it a challenge, the use of a specific filter, or sharing a meme, we unconsciously assume that this is the "right" or desirable behavior.

Likes, shares, and comments are in this context more than just interactions; they are visible indicators of social approval. A post with many likes and shares signals to us: "This is important and relevant." This mechanism reduces the cognitive load of our own decision-making and creates a feeling of security and belonging. One wants to be part of the group that is "in the know." Companies and marketing experts use this effect specifically, for example, by advertising with high follower numbers or positive customer reviews.

2.2 The Fear of Missing Out (FoMO): The Unstoppable Urge to Be There

Closely linked to social proof is the phenomenon of the "Fear of Missing Out" (FoMO). This term describes the oppressive fear of missing out on a rewarding experience that others are currently having. Social media is a

catalyst for FoMO, as it gives us a real-time insight into the seemingly perfect lives of others. We see friends at parties, on trips, or participating in a fun trend, and immediately the feeling of being excluded arises.

This psychological pressure to be constantly online and connected in order not to miss anything is a powerful engine for the spread of hypes. Trends become social events in which one "must" participate in order to belong and to be able to join in the conversation. Not participating can lead to feelings of isolation and inadequacy. The operators of social media platforms are aware of this psychological weak point and use it through notifications and personalized feeds that repeatedly draw us back to the platform. The fear of missing out drives users to follow and participate in trends. FOMO is one of the main factors for addictive social media use and correlates with low self-esteem and life satisfaction.

Authenticity and "Unhinged Content"

Consumers prioritize authenticity, relatability, and entertainment value over polished, product-centric, or seemingly improvised content. 49% of consumers state that the originality of content makes their favorite brands stand out. This trend towards "unhinged" content – raw, un-perfected, and real – results from an overdose of curated and polished content.

Narrative Structures

Certain narrative patterns favor viral spread. "Midway Storytelling" – telling stories beginning at an interesting point – arouses curiosity and motivates further engagement. This technique uses the psychological preference for coherence and closure.

2.3 Emotional Contagion: How Feelings Go Viral

Emotions are contagious. In psychology, one speaks of emotional contagion, the tendency to unconsciously adopt the emotions of others. When we see someone laughing, our mood also brightens. If we see someone crying, we feel with them. In social media, this effect is potentiated. A heartwarming video, an angry comment, or a funny meme can trigger emotional reactions in thousands of users, who then in turn share this content and thus spread the emotion further.

Content that evokes strong emotions such as joy, surprise, anger, or inspiration has a much higher probability of going viral. They activate us on a deeper level and create the urge to share this emotional experience with others. Memes are a perfect example of this mechanism. They often transport a complex emotional message in a simple, easily understandable format that is ideal for rapid dissemination.

The Arousal-Based Emotion Model: Why Arousal is the Key to Virality

To understand why certain content is shared and others are not, we need to move away from the simple concept of "positive vs. negative emotions" and include the dimension of arousal. The Valence-Arousal-Dominance Model (VAD Model) provides a useful framework for this. It describes emotions along three dimensions:

- **Valence:** The positive or negative quality of an emotion (e.g., joy vs. sadness).
- **Arousal:** The degree of physiological and psychological activation that an emotion evokes (e.g., anger with high arousal vs. sadness with low arousal).
- **Dominance:** The feeling of control or powerlessness associated with an emotion.

Studies by Jonah Berger and Katherine Milkman, published in the Journal of Marketing Research, have shown that content that evokes high-arousal emotions is shared significantly more often, regardless of its valence. This is because a state of arousal motivates us to act, and sharing content is such an action. Content that puts us in a state of calmness or sadness (low arousal), on the other hand, is less likely to lead to a sharing action.

Virality – the rapid spread of content – is not based on chance, but on psychological mechanisms that trigger emotions. Emotions are like invisible threads that connect people and motivate them to act, especially to share.

The high share factor arises from arousal-based emotions, i.e., those that generate a high level of excitement (arousal) – a concept from emotion psychology that describes how strongly our body and mind are activated. High arousal leads to physiological reactions such as an increased heart rate or adrenaline release, which urges us to share content in order to channel this energy. Low arousal, as with sadness, on the other hand, reduces the likelihood of sharing.

Virality Mechanisms and Emotion Psychology

Arousal is the activation level of an emotion. High arousal (e.g., excitement) makes us alert and ready to act; low arousal (e.g., contentment) relaxes us. Studies show: high-arousal content is shared 20-30% more often than low-arousal content. Why? High arousal activates the sympathetic nervous system, which leads to a "sharing impulse" – we want to share the excitement with others to process or amplify it.

Example: A video of a breathtaking natural spectacle (high-arousal positive) vs. a sad report (low-arousal negative). The first will go viral because it evokes awe and makes people share it to multiply joy. Negative high-arousal emotions like anger mobilize for social change.

Based on this principle, five emotion clusters can be identified that are of particular interest to content marketers:

The 5 Emotion Clusters for Viral Content

1. Cluster: Awe & Fascination

- **Emotions:** Wonder, admiration, sublimity, inspiration.
- **Psychological Effect:** Awe is a complex emotion that confronts us with something larger than ourselves. It expands our horizons and leads to a feeling of connectedness. This feeling of the "wow effect" creates a high positive arousal. Content that evokes awe is often shared because it awakens the desire to share this inspiring experience with others and to position oneself as someone who appreciates profound and meaningful content.

2. Cluster: Suspense & Anticipation

- **Emotions:** Curiosity, expectation, thrill, hope.
- **Psychological Effect:** Suspense creates high arousal by creating an information gap or an uncertain expectation that the viewer wants to close. Cliffhangers in video series or quizzes, whose answers are only revealed later, use this principle. Sharing such content can be seen as a form of social interaction in which one eagerly awaits the resolution together with others.

3. Cluster: Joy & Humor

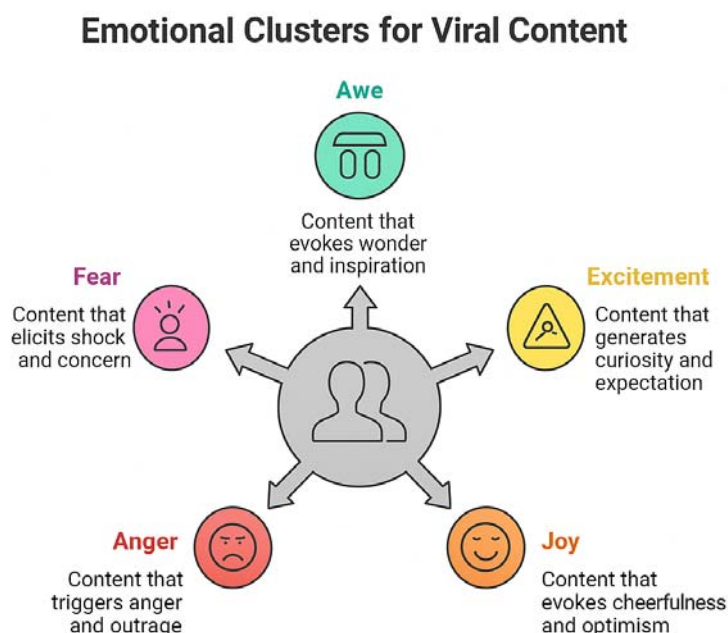
- **Emotions:** Cheerfulness, amusement, enthusiasm, optimism.
- **Psychological Effect:** Joy and humor are strong social binders. Laughing at a joke or the shared experience of a heartwarming moment releases positive neurotransmitters and strengthens social bonds. Content that makes us laugh or gives us a warm feeling is often shared to spread these positive emotions and to be perceived as a humorous and positive person.

4. Cluster: Anger & Outrage

- **Emotions:** Rage, frustration, annoyance, indignation.
- **Psychological Effect:** Negative emotions can also generate high arousal and thus promote the sharing of content. Anger and outrage are particularly strong drivers, as they trigger the desire to draw attention to a perceived injustice, to mobilize like-minded people, or simply to let off steam. Sharing such content often serves to confirm one's own moral convictions and to seek social validation.

5. Cluster: Fear & Surprise

- **Emotions:** Shock, fear, concern, astonishment.
- **Psychological Effect:** Surprise is one of the most fundamental emotions and triggers an immediate attention reaction. It interrupts our expectations and creates high arousal. Content that surprises or frightens us is often shared to warn others, to let them participate in the surprising moment, or to experience a common emotional reaction.



Content Design and Visual Guidelines for Triggering Emotions

Awe

- **Mechanism:** Awe arises from vastness (size, power, beauty, complexity) plus a "need for accommodation" (we must expand our understanding). This triggers physiological arousal and a need to share the experience to create meaning together. (Keltner & Haidt, 2003).
- **Content Design:**
 - Tell scales ("from the atom to the universe"), contrasts (before/after in large leaps), perspective shifts (macro/micro), collective efficacy ("together we can do it...").
 - Use visual dominance: wide, high/deep, "small person in a large landscape."
 - Pacing: Slow, long shots with targeted points of condensation – awe takes time to comprehend. (LC4MP "Limited Capacity Model of Motivated Mediated Message Processing" - Logic: too high a cutting frequency disturbs processing).

Suspense & Surprise

- **Mechanism:** Unexpectedness (+ moderate uncertainty) increases arousal and thus attention binding. Crucial: provide resolution, otherwise frustration/backlash. (Berger, 2011; Loewenstein, 1994).
- **Content Design:**
 - Set-Up → Misdirection → Reveal in 30-90 seconds.
 - "Curiosity Gap" yes, clickbait no: open a gap, but deliver the answer cleanly; exaggerated, irrelevant gaps harm expectation management and trust. (Scacco & Muddiman, 2016; Blom & Hansen, 2015).
 - Pacing: Medium cutting frequency, clear visual anchors to avoid cognitive overload (LC4MP).

Anger & Outrage (moral anger)

- **Mechanism:** Moral-emotional language activates group norms and action impulses ("sharing as a signal of belonging"). Highly shareable in the short term, long-term risk for brand safety and dialogue breakdown. (Brady et al., 2017).
- **Content Design:**
 - Outrage → Solution: Make a grievance visible, provide options for action (donation link, petition, checklist).
 - Language guideline: precise and verifiable criticism instead of sweeping generalizations; avoid dehumanizing frames.

Anxiety & Fear

- **Mechanism:** Threat stimuli increase arousal and prevention focus – shareable when a coping path is visible (otherwise withdrawal). (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013).
- **Content Design:**
 - Threat → Efficacy ("What can I do now?").
 - Visuals: Contrasting before/after frames and checklists with manageable steps (self-efficacy).
 - Pacing: clearly structured, cognitively relieving (LC4MP); avoid continuous alarm.

Interest & Curiosity

- **Mechanism:** Interest arises from novelty/complexity + manageability; curiosity is fed by information gaps that we want to close. This "learning arousal" is particularly shareable because it supports status (competent/informed) and community (understanding together). (Silvia, 2005; Loewenstein, 1994).
- **Content Design:**
 - "Explain-Like-I'm-5" segments plus link to "Deep Dive."
 - Use question headlines, but deliver the answer; work visually with step-by-step diagrams.

Don'ts: The Pitfalls of the Negativity Bias

The negativity bias is a psychological tendency where negative experiences and information have a stronger impact on our psyche than positive ones. This can lead to an over-reliance on negative emotional triggers such as fear or anger to attract attention.

- **Avoid clickbaiting and excessive dramatization:** Misleading headlines or overly dramatic representations that are not supported by the content lead to disappointment and a loss of trust.
- **No fear-mongering without a solution:** Fear can be a strong motivator, but should never be used without a clear, constructive solution or help. Otherwise, you leave your audience with a feeling of helplessness and unease.
- **Refrain from exploiting controversy:** The targeted stoking of conflicts or the instrumentalization of social divisions for marketing purposes is ethically highly questionable and can lead to lasting reputational damage.
- **Be aware of emotional contagion:** Emotions, especially in social networks, can spread like wildfire. Be aware of the responsibility you bear when spreading highly emotional, especially negative, content.

Visual Guidelines for Emotional Content Design

The visual design of content plays a crucial role in the emotional appeal. Our brain processes images faster and more directly than text. Therefore, image composition, pacing, and contrast must be used specifically to support the desired emotions.

- **Color Psychology:** Colors have a direct psychological effect. Warm colors like red and orange can be stimulating and activating, while cool colors like blue and green tend to be calming. The deliberate use of color palettes can significantly influence the emotional tonality of a piece of content.
- **Image Composition:** Techniques such as the rule of thirds, leading lines, or the deliberate use of symmetry and asymmetry guide the viewer's gaze and can create harmony, tension, or dynamism. A calm, centered composition can, for example, convey trust and stability, while a diagonal line suggests excitement and movement.
- **Pacing and Editing (in Videos):** The speed of the cuts and the duration of the shots have a considerable influence on the arousal level. Fast cuts increase the perceived energy and excitement, while long, calm shots create space for emotional depth and reflection.
- **Contrast:** Strong contrasts in brightness and color attract attention and can create a dramatic or energetic mood. Soft, low contrasts, on the other hand, appear gentler and more harmonious. Successful emotional marketing requires more than just pushing the right emotional buttons. It requires an ethical compass based on transparency, authenticity, and respect for the audience. In combination with a well-thought-out visual design and precise success measurement that focuses on the quality of the interaction, emotional triggers can become a powerful instrument not only to attract attention, but also to build long-term, meaningful relationships with the people we want to reach.

2.4 Cognitive Dissonance: How We Justify Our Behavior to Ourselves

Another interesting psychological phenomenon in the context of social media trends is cognitive dissonance. This term, coined by the psychologist Leon Festinger, describes the uncomfortable mental state that arises when our beliefs and our behavior do not align. For example, if we know that a particular challenge is actually pointless or even dangerous, but still participate because our friends are doing it (social proof, FoMO), an inner tension arises.

To resolve this dissonance, we tend to change our attitude and justify our behavior. We convince ourselves that the trend is not so silly after all, that it is fun, or that it is important to be a part of it. This process of post-hoc rationalization can lead us to identify even more strongly with the trend and to defend and spread it more actively.

2.5 Scarcity and Exclusivity: The Allure of the Limited

The principle of scarcity is a powerful psychological trigger that states that we attribute a higher value to things when they are only available in limited quantities. In social media marketing, this effect is used specifically to create a sense of urgency and exclusivity. Limited offers ("Only for a short time!"), exclusive content for a specific group of followers, or invitations to closed groups create the impression that one could miss out on something special if one does not act quickly.

This mechanism can also be applied to trends. If access to a new social network is initially only possible by invitation (as was once the case with Clubhouse) or if certain filters or functions are only available for a limited time, this increases their attractiveness. The exclusivity creates a hype, and users actively try to become part of this exclusive group.

Scarce Attention & Novelty Competition

Digital feeds are attention markets. Classics of network science show: attention for new items rises rapidly and then decays predictably; many contents compete simultaneously, whereby even good contributions are quickly displaced. (Wu & Huberman, 2007; Weng et al., 2012).

3. Technological Accelerators: The Architecture of Virality

In addition to psychological factors, it is the technological conditions of social media platforms that make such a rapid and far-reaching spread of trends possible in the first place.

3.1 Network Effects: The More, the Merrier

Social media are a prime example of platforms that benefit from network effects. A network effect occurs when the value of a product or service for the individual user increases the more other people also use it. A telephone is useless if no one else owns one. A social network is all the more valuable the more friends, acquaintances, and interesting personalities one can find and interact with there.

This effect leads to a positive feedback loop: new users attract more new users, which increases the value of the platform exponentially. As soon as a trend reaches a critical mass of participants, it can spread explosively due to the network effect. Every new participant who takes up and shares the trend makes it visible to their own network and increases the probability that more people will join in.

3.2 Algorithmic Amplification: Personalized Realities

Social platforms use sophisticated algorithms that are optimized to keep users on the platform for as long as possible. These algorithms prioritize content with high engagement potential and thus ensure an accelerated spread of emotionally appealing or controversial content. The platforms themselves thus act as catalysts for viral dissemination.

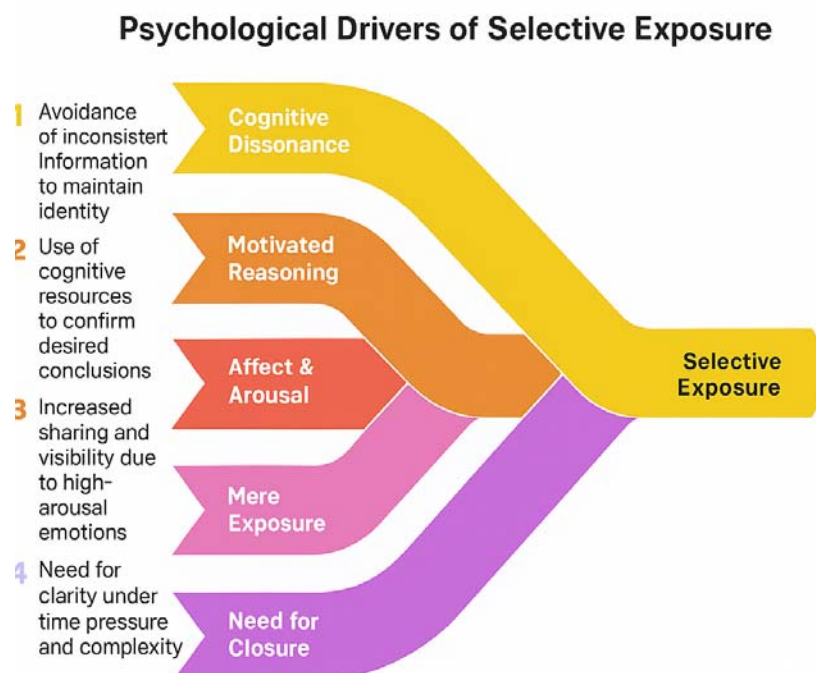
The feeds that we see on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook are not a chronological sequence of posts. They are curated by complex algorithms whose main goal is to keep us on the platform for as long as possible in order to show us as much advertising as possible. These algorithms analyze our past behavior – which posts we like, share, and comment on, how long we watch videos – and create a detailed profile of our interests from this.

Based on this profile, we are then shown content that the algorithm assumes we will like. This has far-reaching consequences for the spread of trends. If a piece of content achieves a high interaction rate with a small group of users (many likes, comments, and shares in a short time), the algorithm interprets this as a signal of relevance. It will then show this content to an ever-larger number of users, which can lead to a viral explosion.

However, this mechanism can also contribute to the creation of so-called filter bubbles or echo chambers, in which we are only shown content that confirms our existing opinions. This can intensify social polarization and make critical discourse more difficult.

Psychological micro-mechanisms that drive selective exposure

1. **Cognitive Dissonance & Identity Protection.** Inconsistent information creates discomfort (dissonance) and identity threat; consistent content reduces both – therefore it is preferentially sought and shared. Meta-analytically, the urge for confirming information is well-documented (Hart et al., 2009). (Festinger, 1957; Hart et al., 2009).
2. **Motivated Reasoning & Confirmation Bias.** People use cognitive resources more to secure desired conclusions than to maximize "truth" – especially on identity issues. (Kunda, 1990; Nickerson, 1998).
3. **Affect & Arousal.** High-arousing emotions (awe, anger, fear) increase sharing and visibility; moral-emotional language enhances diffusion ("moral contagion"). (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Brady et al., 2017).
4. **Mere-Exposure & Processing Fluency.** Repeated and fluently processable stimuli are evaluated more positively – in feeds, this favors the preference for the familiar (Zajonc, 1968).
5. **Need for Closure.** Under complexity/time pressure, the need for unambiguity increases – consistent content provides it quickly; dissonant content is more likely to be avoided (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996).



These mechanisms have a predisposing effect: Selective exposure is not only a consequence, but also a driver of trend dynamics, because it shifts supply (curation) and demand (user choice) in the same direction.

Mobile Optimization and User Experience

The complete optimization for mobile devices allows for anytime accessibility and a seamless user experience. Vertical videos with an aspect ratio of 9:16 achieve a 90% completion rate, as they can be comfortably

consumed without rotating the device. This technological simplification reduces barriers to consumption and sharing of content.

AI-powered Content Creation

Artificial intelligence accelerates not only the dissemination, but also the creation of content. 61% of organizations primarily use AI to reduce the workload of their employees. AI tools support idea generation, content creation, image editing, and even responding to messages via chatbots. However, there is a growing skepticism towards purely AI-generated content – 27% of consumers would block or unfollow accounts that post content identifiable as AI-generated.

4. The Role of Influencers: Trendsetters and Anchors of Trust

In the complex dynamics of social media trends, influencers play a crucial role as catalysts. Influencers act as a kind of "trustworthy friend" for their followers. Their recommendations are often perceived as more authentic and credible than classic advertising. When an influential creator picks up on a new trend, be it a product, a dance, or an opinion, they immediately give this trend high visibility and legitimacy.

Their role can be well explained with Rogers' diffusion of innovations theory. This theory describes how innovations (or in this case, trends) spread in a social system. Rogers divides the population into different adopter categories: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. Influencers can often be assigned to the innovators or early adopters. They are the first to pick up on new ideas and contribute significantly to their acceptance by the broad mass, the early majority. They function as important opinion leaders who build the bridge between niches and the mainstream.

5. Conclusion: A Dance Between Human Nature and Technology

The accelerated global spread of trends and hypes in social media is a multi-layered phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a single factor. It is the result of a perfect symbiosis of needs deeply anchored in the human psyche and the technological architectures of social media platforms.

Our innate need for social belonging (social proof), the fear of missing out (FoMO), and our susceptibility to emotional contagion make us receptive to participating in collective phenomena. Psychological mechanisms such as the reduction of cognitive dissonance and the attraction of scarcity reinforce this effect.

At the same time, the technological conditions of the platforms create the ideal breeding ground for virality. Network effects ensure exponential growth as soon as a critical mass is reached, and the algorithms function as fire accelerants by identifying potentially viral content and specifically distributing it to a broad audience. Influencers act in this ecosystem as decisive catalysts who initiate trends and give them the necessary credibility and reach to make the leap into the mainstream.

For the individual, it is important to be aware of these mechanisms in order to critically reflect on one's own media consumption and not to blindly follow every hype. For companies, marketers, and communicators, understanding these psychological and technological drivers offers immense opportunities to effectively spread their messages. But with this power comes a great responsibility to use these tools ethically and for the benefit of society. The world of social media trends will continue to evolve, but the fundamental psychological principles that underlie it will continue to significantly influence our behavior in the digital space in the future.

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