



PHOENICIA UNIVERSITY

The Science Behind Going Viral

How algorithms, psychology, and storytelling decide what the world watches, shares, and forgets.

Based on lecture material on Social Media Management

1 What Makes Content Go Viral?

Going viral isn't luck. It's the outcome of a system — a platform's algorithm reading behavioral signals, a viewer's brain reacting to emotion, and a piece of content built to be watched, and shared.

It's Systemic

Algorithms don't guess what's good — they measure what people actually do: watch time, replays, and shares.

It's Fast

Most viral content earns most of its reach within the first few hours, while the recommendation system is still deciding.

The Three Forces Behind Every Viral Post

Algorithm

The system that decides who gets shown the content next.

Psychology

The emotional trigger that makes someone actually hit share.

Story

The structure that keeps a viewer watching all the way to the end.



2 You Feed the Algorithm Every Day

Every scroll, pause, and skip trains the system — you're not just a viewer, you're training data.

1

Watching to the end

Completion rate is one of the strongest signals a platform uses to decide who else sees a video next.

2

Rewatching a clip

A second viewing signals stronger interest than a like — some algorithms weight replays heavily.

3

Scrolling past in a second

A fast skip tells the algorithm this content isn't for this viewer — and it adjusts instantly.

4

Sending it to a friend

A direct share is one of the clearest signals that content deserves a wider audience.

5

Leaving a comment

Early comments in the first minutes can push a post into a larger distribution pool.

6

Saving a post for later

Saves signal long-term value, which many platforms now weight above quick likes.



3

Understanding Social Media Algorithms

How It Actually Works

Modern feeds aren't chronological. Machine-learning models rank content for each viewer individually, scoring it on predicted watch time, replay likelihood, and the probability of a comment or share — then testing it on a small audience before deciding whether to push it further.

THE DAY THE FEED CHANGED

Instagram's Shift to Ranked Feeds

Instagram, 2016

Instagram abandoned its chronological timeline for an algorithmic one, ranking posts by predicted interest instead of post time. Engagement-focused accounts saw sudden swings in reach overnight — proof that on these platforms, the rules of visibility can change without warning.

How Creators Respond

Professional creators treat the first hour after posting as a mini-test: strong early engagement signals the algorithm to expand distribution, so many post when their specific audience is most active rather than chasing one universal “best” time.

Lesson: the algorithm isn't hiding your content from you — it's testing it on real people first.



4

Creating Scroll-Stopping Hooks

What Makes a Hook Work

A hook is the first few seconds of content, built purely to stop a scroll. The strongest hooks create a small, immediate gap between what a viewer expects and what they see — a visual surprise, an unfinished sentence, or a bold claim that demands resolution.

THE CURIOSITY GAP

Why Unfinished Information Is Addictive

The Zeigarnik Effect, psychology research

Psychologists call this the Zeigarnik effect — the tendency to remember and dwell on incomplete tasks or information far more than completed ones. Hooks like “wait for it” or “heres what nobody tells you about—” work because the brain doesn't like leaving a gap open.

How Creators Use It

Short-form creators often move their strongest moment to the very first frame, then explain how they got there — starting mid-action instead of with a slow introduction.

Lesson: you have less time to earn attention than it took to read this sentence.



5

The Psychology of Sharing

It's Rarely About the Facts

People share content to shape how others see them, to bond over shared feeling, and to pass along something useful — rarely just because a fact is true. Content that makes the sharer look smart, funny, or in-the-know travels fastest.

A FRAMEWORK FOR CONTAGION

STEPPS

Jonah Berger, Wharton School, 2013

Berger's research on virality identified six drivers of sharing: Social currency, Triggers, Emotion, Public visibility, Practical value, and Stories. His studies also found that high-arousal emotions — awe, humor, anger — drive far more sharing than low-arousal emotions like sadness or contentment.

How the Public Reacts

This is why outrage and delight both travel faster online than sympathy — both are high-arousal states, even though they feel like opposite reactions.

Lesson: strong feeling spreads content; strong facts alone usually don't.



6 Storytelling That Connects

Every Viral Story Has a Shape

The strongest short-form content still follows classic story structure compressed into seconds: a relatable setup, a clear tension or stakes, and a resolution the viewer feels they earned by watching to the end.

AN UNPLANNED VIRAL STORY

The Ocean Spray Skateboard Video

Nathan Apodaca, 2020

A man's truck broke down on the highway, so he filmed himself skateboarding alongside it, drinking cranberry juice to a classic song. The clip's low-stakes, relatable charm — no script, no studio — made it one of the most shared videos of the year, and briefly boosted the cranberry juice brand's sales.

Why It Worked

The video had no traditional “hook” at all — its authenticity and easy mood was the hook. It's proof that structure and feeling matter more than production value.

Lesson: a relatable feeling can outperform a big budget.



7 Best Times to Post

There's no single magic hour — timing follows when your specific audience has attention to give.

Time Window	Why Attention Is There	Best Content Type
Early morning commute	Passive scrolling before the day starts	News, quick tips, short clips
Midday break	A short attention window during lunch	Light entertainment, memes
Early evening	Work has ended but the day isn't over — a high-traffic window	Longer videos, storytelling
Late evening	Wind-down scrolling before sleep, often the day's longest session	Binge-friendly series, deep content
Weekend mornings	Lower pressure means slower, more attentive scrolling	Tutorials, in-depth content



8 Engagement Strategies

Engagement isn't something that happens to a post — it's something a creator actively builds.

1

Reply to early comments

Fast replies in the first minutes keep the conversation — and the algorithm's attention — active.

2

Ask a real question

Captions that ask something specific get more comments than generic captions.

3

Create with, not at, your audience

Duets, stitches, and reaction formats turn viewers into collaborators, multiplying reach.

4

Post consistently, not constantly

A steady, predictable rhythm builds algorithmic trust faster than sporadic high-volume bursts.

5

Give people a reason to save

Practical, reference-style content earns saves — a stronger long-term signal than likes.

6

Show up elsewhere first

Engaging authentically on other creators' posts builds the relationships that convert into followers.



9

Analyzing Viral Trends

Every Trend Has a Life Cycle

Trends move through four stages: a small spark among early adopters, a rapid growth phase as creators remix the format, a saturation peak, and a fast decline as audiences move on. Jumping in during the spark or growth phase matters far more than production value.

TIMING OVER POLISH

The Mittens Photo Meme

US Presidential Inauguration, 2021

A single candid photo of a senator sitting with mittens at an event spread rapidly because it was open-ended and easy to remix — people dropped the image into countless unrelated scenes. Because so many people joined in within days, the format itself became more famous than the original moment.

How to Analyze a Trend Before Joining

Ask whether the format is still in its growth phase, whether it fits your own content naturally, and whether you can add something rather than copy it exactly.

Lesson: by the time a trend feels obvious to everyone, it's often already near its peak.



10

Seven Ideas Worth Remembering

Concept	What It Means	Real-World Example
Algorithms rank, not guess	Behavior signals like watch time and shares decide reach	Instagram's 2016 ranked feed
Hooks buy you time	The first seconds decide whether anyone stays	The Zeigarnik / curiosity gap
Emotion drives sharing	High-arousal feelings spread faster than facts	Berger's STEPPS framework, 2013
Story structure still matters	Setup, tension, and payoff work even in seconds	The Ocean Spray skateboard video
Timing follows attention	Post when your audience is actually scrolling	Evening wind-down scrolling peaks
Engagement is a two-way habit	Replying and collaborating multiplies reach	Duets, stitches, fast replies
Trends have a life cycle	Early, adaptable participation beats late copies	The mittens photo meme, 2021





Key Takeaways

- ◆ Virality follows patterns—not chance.
- ◆ Audience behavior drives successful campaigns.
- ◆ Creativity is strengthened by strategy and analytics.
- ◆ Learn to create content with purpose and impact.