

## ABSTRACT

As the Internet has rapidly become the main conduit of information and communication, our society has been evolving alongside it. This has led to a change in behavioral communication habits that sees people of this era engaging in previously unprecedented behavior. Symptomatic of this evolution is development of trends in terms of massive cultural connectivity. Trends have had relatively a large impact on society in the past, however now aided by the expansive reach and gravitas of the Internet, they captivate a much larger and a more diverse audience. We seek to explore the relationship of trends, as virtual constructs, and their impact on our culture. To do this, it is important to understand the definition of a trend, the structures of trends that allow them to so effectively capture the attention of our society, and how the effects of trends have appeared past virtual space. With these factors we hope to gather information to accurately define the developed role that the Internet and current information technologies have played in the present state of societal development.

In this time of mass connectivity brought upon by the rise of social media influence, human behavior has undergone a massive shift. Actions broadcast through social media platforms reach viral status by means of images and videos that end up trending and seen by thousands of people from all over the world due to the Internet's accessibility. For this paper we examine the causes of trends as well as its implications outside the virtual world. Our goal is to try to understand the anatomy and lifecycle of a trend and its impact on societal behavior. In studying this, we will observe the structures of an online trend, why people attach themselves to trends in terms of psychological reasonings, and where these trends make the most impact, not only online but in how users intake all the information and project themselves to others online and away from the keyboard. It is important in this era of the Internet to understand how this new form of communication will alter societal fabrics and what that means for us as users going forward.

The rapid growth and participation in social media networks have become the catalysts for viral online trends and challenges. Users are able to share headlines, opinions, and statuses internationally through their social media profiles.<sup>1</sup> While the news, opinions, and statuses are important to the structure of how and what information users receive, our main question is how do trends or challenges become popular? Looking at influencer marketing can be an agent to understanding how these crazes emerge within the constructs of social media and make its way into the physical world. In the dissertation, “#Sponsored: The Emergence of Influencer Marketing,” Steve Woods explains that consumers are most likely to respond to a message

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<sup>1</sup> Leihan Zhang, Jichang Zhao, and Ke Xu, "Who Creates Trends in Online Social Media: The Crowd or Opinion Leaders?" *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 21, no. 1 (2015): doi:10.1111/jcc4.12145.

positively if it derives from trusted friends or personas.<sup>2</sup> According to Swant, a joint study done by Twitter and Annalect, a provider of data-driven marketing strategies, found that 56 percent of the users who were surveyed relied on recommendations from friends and family while 49 percent referred to reviews from influencers.<sup>3</sup> The study further emphasizes the impact of influencers, such as celebrities, on filtering products and ideas that are beneficial for not only the influencer, but also for the general public. Marketing strategies integrate social media influencers due to their role in shaping consumers' opinions on certain products and brands.<sup>4</sup> This observation indicates the potential power influencers have through word-of-mouth. In this sense, the power of influencers can not only be applied to products and brands, but it can also be applied to news, notable debates, and other noteworthy topics.

In addition, influencers and "opinion leaders" act as aids in the successful distribution of new ideas, products, and Internet slang.<sup>5</sup> Leihan Zhang, Jichang Zhao, and Ke Xu filtered tweets from a Weibo API (application program interface) to determine the peaks of popular Internet slang. They found that there are two stages of popularity occurring for each chosen Internet phrase. The initial peak represents small-scale coverage while the second peak illustrates large-scale coverage.<sup>6</sup> They discovered that a large following suggests the number of potential

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<sup>2</sup> Steven Woods, "#Sponsored: The Emergence of Influencer Marketing" (2016). *Chancellor's Honors Program Projects*. [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_chanhonoproj/](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj/) 1976

<sup>3</sup> Steven Woods, "#Sponsored: The Emergence of Influencer Marketing," 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Morgan Glucksman, "The Rise of Social Media Influencer Marketing on Lifestyle Branding: A Case Study of Lucie Fink," *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 8, no. 2 (2017), <https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/communications/journal/wp-content/uploads/sites/153/2017/12/Fall2017Journal.pdf#page=77>.

<sup>5</sup> Leihan Zhang, Jichang Zhao, and Ke Xu, "Who Creates Trends in Online Social Media: The Crowd or Opinion Leaders?" 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Leihan Zhang, Jichang Zhao, and Ke Xu, 2015.

listeners there is in presence of a new word or phrase, but information is travelled more locally.<sup>7</sup> In the second peak, the participation of ordinary users helped spread information across various networks at a faster rate.<sup>8</sup> So, the factors that constitutes a trend or challenge going viral relies on the collective attention of ordinary users and active online engagement through reposting, commenting, replying, mentions.<sup>9</sup>

For example, Jake Paul, a YouTube celebrity with over 18 million subscribers, participated in the Bird Box challenge in which the goal is to go about daily activities while blindfolded.<sup>10</sup> The challenge appears to be amusing yet threatening. As a response to this challenge, Paul is seen driving and walking aimlessly onto a busy Los Angeles street blindfolded.<sup>11</sup> With an audience demographic ranging from eight to 16 years olds<sup>12</sup>, Paul's influence can potentially put his 18 million following in danger. This is a prime example of how a celebrity's words and actions can heavily sway the younger generation into thinking or doing hazardous stunts in return for views and likes. To put it in perspective, users receive information from various sources, popular or not, but it is also up to the user to evaluate exactly what to do with the information they are given — whether to participate through sharing or buying a product or consume the information and do nothing to further its influence.

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<sup>7</sup> Zhang et al., 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Zhang et al., 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Zhang et al., 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Julia Alexander, "Jake Paul Shows off Dangerous Stunts for Bird Box Challenge," The Verge, January 07, 2019, accessed April 30, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/1/7/18172657/jake-paul-bird-box-challenge-youtube-blindfold-netflix>.

<sup>11</sup> Julia Alexander, "Jake Paul Shows off Dangerous Stunts for Bird Box Challenge," 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Julia Alexander, 2019.

Social media platforms have integrated into our everyday lives to the point where it affects how people interact with it and with other users. The public generally follows trends such as challenges where they watch a viral video, and if they are feeling adventurous, they try the challenge out for themselves as explained with the Bird Box Challenge. With huge platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allocating public communication, there are unseen factors that users who do post influential material are not aware of. The underlying psychology behind why people follow trends is mainly because of our Internet based addiction to social media. In the journal "The relationship between addictive use of social media, narcissism, and self-esteem", written by Cecilie Schou Andreassen, he asserts the viewers about why we are addicted to social media. He then explains how people tend to have a fear of missing out on what is happening around them. It is easy to stay in touch with the world now when we have phones to quickly access social media that can connect us instantly. Easy accessibility can lead to excessive use to the point where people can feel anxious when they are disconnected for a long period of time.<sup>13</sup> Another principle suggests that excessive use of social media is to gain confidence. A researcher from the University of Bergen discovered that there is a correlation between addictive social media use and narcissism through a survey from Norway's national newspapers website. The statistics show that the ones that tend to be on social media more use it to feed their ego.<sup>14</sup> In another journal, "Social media and its implications for viral marketing" written by Natalie Lammas, she addresses the "social bandwagon" and why people follow along with posts.

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<sup>13</sup> Miller, Rohan and Natalie Lammas. "Social media and its implications for viral marketing." (2010), 2.

<sup>14</sup>Andreassen, Cecilie Schou, Ståle Pallesen, and Mark D. Griffiths. "The Relationship between Addictive Use of Social Media, Narcissism, and Self-esteem: Findings from a Large National Survey." *Addictive Behaviors* 64 (January 2017): 287-93. doi:10.1016/j.addbeh.2016.03.006.

Usually, viral content rises on the “social bandwagon” and in turn, affects people to think they are missing out if they do not fulfill the challenges or meet everyone’s supposed expectations. Therefore, the users tries to follow along with the trends to be in the “trendy” group<sup>15</sup>. In the book, *Influence* by Cialdini, he talks about how advertisements persuade us to buy items and how the key words like best sellers would convince people that others think it’s great too so you should too. With that it could also relate to why people follow along with trends because if someone does it and has many views then it is probably cool and so it’s a good chance that it is worth my time.<sup>16</sup>

As social media trends continue to garner more and more users, there is no doubt that future generations will continue following these what seem to be brainless challenges. The majority of participants that engage in these activities tend to be youth or young adults because this is the age group that are greatly involved with social media. Individuals usually participate in these challenges out of curiosity, boredom, or as previously stated, the feeling of missing out on what the rest of the world is occupied with. As a result, this generation of young adults may also be affected emotionally and physically depending on the type of challenge that trending.

For instance, the Cinnamon Challenge was one of the most popular and notorious challenges that affected the public negatively due to how dangerous and harmful cinnamon can physically be to a person. This challenge was to try to swallow a tablespoon full of cinnamon powder within a minute, but since cinnamon is a substance that doesn’t completely break down, it can stay in one’s system for years and eventually build up in their system. Statistics have revealed that at least 30 people have been sent to the hospital because of this trend, and “that the

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<sup>15</sup> Miller, Social media, 4-5

<sup>16</sup> Cialdini, Robert B. “Pre-suasion: A Revolutionary Way to Influence and Persuade” (2018).

growing Internet presence of the Cinnamon Challenge has led to a significant rise in calls to the American Association of Poison Control Centers”,<sup>17</sup> which reveals how dangerous a social media challenge can be. Despite the consequences, many people are still willing to risk their lives just to be part of the experience because of how influential and potent the viral content is.

The Cinnamon Challenge has not been the only physically harmful challenge, in fact, there are hundreds of these life-threatening challenges that people, especially teens try out because they think “it’s funny”. In her article, *Disturbing Trend of Deadly Social Media Challenges*, Fiona Guy expresses the understanding that “teens compete with each other viewing the entire game as a fun and amusing activity to ease their boredom and achieve respect from their friends”<sup>18</sup>, explicitly showing how much teens care about how people view them and the respect they get from doing these challenges. The effects of these social media challenges are impactful to the public, particularly the teens because they are not only constantly looking for new and “fun” things to do, but they are also trying to find validation and acceptance through participating in dangerous activities.

In contrast to the Cinnamon Challenge, the ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis), also known as the Ice Bucket Challenge is one that benefits the public. ALS is disease in one’s nervous system that weakens their muscles and physical abilities and can lead to paralyzation. This ice bucket challenge is to raise awareness about ALS and encourage donations to charities or associations. According to an article from Tufts University, “the Ice Bucket Challenge may be

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<sup>17</sup> Christian Nordqvist, "The Cinnamon Challenge Lands Many Children In Hospital."

<sup>18</sup> Fiona Guy, "Disturbing Trend of Deadly Social Media Challenges."

one of the most powerful examples of the influence of social media over our behavior”<sup>19</sup>, portraying how effective social media is in bringing people together when raising awareness. It is also stated that there has been an increase of likes on Facebook and followers on Twitter, along with the amount of participants engaging in this challenge. This particular trend shows the beneficial and positive aspects to social media challenges.

The Internet and social media have opened pathways of communication allowing users previously unparalleled access to communities and ideas that they otherwise would be unaware of. Development of social habits have taken a drastic change, propagating at an increasingly rapid rate due to the level of accessibility and the power of influencers that the Internet provides. Knowing this, it is important to continue conversations that consider the long-term ramifications of these new technological systems and to gain a more profound understanding of the underlying factors that have made such systems so impactful. More specifically, we have to consider that the next generation is influenced and affected by activities circulating throughout the Internet. In a broad sense, we are looking at a dramatic shift in the way ideas culminate, who looks at these ideas, and what exactly do they do with the information they are given. Looking at the structure and nature of social media and viral content, we believe that trends and challenges will continue to prosper on the Internet. Trends and challenges are a platform for positive social change; however, they also allow for advanced forms of exploitation that society has never before been possible. It is imperative that society evaluates trends as means of cultural development, and assesses how we want to deal with this phenomena moving forward. Trends are massively powerful in their ability to change social perception, and therefore require vigilance on the part

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<sup>19</sup> "The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge: The Impact of Social Media on Health Communication."



of us experienced users in order to make sure that power shifts in a positive direction rather than putting ourselves and the younger generation in danger.

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## OUTLINE

### BODY

1. **First paragraph:** What creates the structure of online trends
2. **Second paragraph:** Why does the general public follow trends/psychological reasonings
3. **Third Paragraph:** The effects of following trends as well as implications in the physical world

## ROLE SHEET

Eric-Intro, Conclusion, Abstract

Ianne-editor, works site

Michelle-first paragraph

Nicole-second paragraph

Emily-third paragraph