Influence of Viral Contents on the Rapid Spread of Information on the Social Media Platforms in Nigeria

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Abstract: This paper highlighted the influence of viral content on the rapid spread of information on the social media platforms. This paper raised four (4) research questions as guide. The descriptive survey design was used in this investigation. The study population was three hundred and fifty (350) social media users. The sample size of one hundred and thirty (130) social media content creator and users was adopted relying on the simple random sampling technique. The questionnaire was used as the instrument for collecting data. Descriptive statistics specifically tables and mean were used for the analysis of data collected. Findings shows that emotional connection, visual appeal, relevance, social proof, convenience, controversy, novelty, humour, timeliness and interactive elements are the factors that contribute to the rapid spread of viral content on social media platforms. The paper concluded that the potential consequences of the rapid spread of viral content to individuals and society include dissemination of false information which causes harm to individuals and society, feelings of anxiety and stress, increased social media addiction, negative impact on mental health for some individuals, anxious feelings, and stress due to the constant stream of alarming information. This paper recommended that platforms should establish, enforce clear, stringent content moderation policies that address the unique challenges posed by viral content and development of advanced algorithms that should be regularly updated to adapt to evolving tactics used by those spreading false information, which should work in tandem with human review processes to ensure a balanced approach.

Keywords: False news, viral content, algorithms, misinformation, social media

INTRODUCTION

The rapid proliferation of information on social media platforms has become a norm in today's digital age. The ease of sharing and consuming content has made it possible for news, trends, and ideas to spread like wildfire across the globe. One of the key factors contributing to this phenomenon is the rise of viral content, which refers to content that gains widespread popularity and attention in a short period of time (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Viral content takes many forms, including memes, videos, images, and articles, and often becomes the subject of online conversations and discussions. The mechanics of viral content are intricately linked to the algorithms social media platforms employ. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok use sophisticated algorithms to curate content for users, often prioritizing posts that exhibit high engagement rates. According to Allcott and Gentzkow (2023), these algorithms amplify content that garners significant interaction, creating a feedback loop that further accelerates the spread of viral material. This algorithmic preference for engagement-driven content can lead to rapid dissemination of both information and misinformation, highlighting the dual-edged nature of virality.

The influence of viral content on social media is significant, as it has the potential to reach a large audience quickly and efficiently. Studies have shown that viral content can spread across social media platforms in a matter of minutes or even seconds, often reaching millions of users before it can be officially verified or fact-checked (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013). This rapid spread of information can have both positive and negative consequences, as it can lead to both the dissemination of important news and the amplification of misinformation. Furthermore, the role of influencers and celebrities cannot be understated in the context of viral content. Influencers with large followings have the power to catalyse the virility of content through their endorsements and shares. Smith and Duggan (2023) noted that the amplification effect influencers created contributes significantly to the speed and extent of information dissemination on social media. Their involvement can turn ordinary posts into viral sensations, further complicating the landscape of information spread.

One of the key reasons why viral content is so effective at spreading information is its ability to tap into human emotions and psychological biases. Research has shown that people are more likely to share content that resonates with their emotions, such as humour, excitement, or inspiration (Chang et al., 2016). Additionally, viral content often leverages cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias or the availability heuristic, to make it more likely to be shared with others (Nawrotzki et al., 2013). Berger and Milkman (2024) indicate that content that evokes strong emotional responses, such as surprise, anger, or joy, is more likely to be shared and disseminated. This emotional engagement often drives users to spread content within their own networks,

amplifying its reach. The interplay between emotional resonance and algorithmic promotion thus creates a potent combination for the rapid spread of information across social media.

Another factor that contributes to the influence of viral content on social media is its ability to create a sense of community and social connection. When people share and engage with viral content, they are often doing so in response to a sense of belonging or shared identity with others (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This sense of community can be particularly powerful in online spaces, where individuals may feel isolated or disconnected from others.

The impact of viral content on social media has been particularly significant in recent years, as the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented surge in online activity and information sharing (Zhang et al., 2020). As governments and health organizations have struggled to keep up with the rapid spread of misinformation about the pandemic, viral content has played a crucial role in disseminating important health information and guidelines to the public.

Despite its potential benefits, however, the influence of viral content on social media also raises concerns about the spread of misinformation and disinformation. As researchers have noted, the rapid spread of information on social media can create an environment in which false or misleading information is amplified and validated (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013). This can have serious consequences for individuals, communities, and societies.

Statement of the Problem
The widespread dissemination of information on social media platforms has become a significant concern in recent years, as the rapid spread of viral content has led to the proliferation of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. Despite the potential benefits of social media in facilitating information sharing and communication, the unregulated and unfiltered nature of online content has created an environment in which false or misleading information can be easily amplified and disseminated to a large audience. This phenomenon has significant consequences for individuals, communities, and societies, as it can lead to confusion, misinformation, and even harm. Furthermore, the increasing reliance on social media as a primary source of news and information has raised concerns about the potential erosion of traditional news sources and the decline of critical thinking skills. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the influence of viral content on the rapid spread of information on social media platforms, with a focus on identifying the factors that contribute to its spread, the impact it has on online behaviour, and the potential consequences for individuals and society.

Objective of the Study
The objective of this seminar is to investigate the influence of viral content on the rapid spread of information on social media platforms and to identify the key factors that contribute to its spread,

with a focus on understanding the impact of viral content on online behaviour and information sharing and exploring strategies for mitigating its negative consequences.

Specifically, the research objectives were to:
1. Identify the factors that contribute to the rapid spread of viral content on social media platforms.
2. Examine the impact of viral content on online behaviour and information sharing.
3. Analyse the potential consequences of the rapid spread of viral content to individuals and society
4. Develop strategies for mitigating the negative consequences of viral content on social media platforms.

Research Questions

This paper investigated the following research questions:
1. What are the factors that contribute to the rapid spread of viral content on social media platforms?
2. How does the spread of viral content influence online behaviour and information sharing?
3. What are the potential consequences of the rapid spread of viral content to individuals and society?
4. What strategies can be developed to mitigate the negative consequences of viral content on social media platforms?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Factors that contribute to the rapid spread of viral content on social media platforms

The rapid spread of viral content on social media platforms can be attributed to several key factors, which include the nature of the content itself, the algorithms driving these platforms, and the behaviour of users. Understanding these factors provides insight into why certain content gains widespread attention quickly. However, these factors are listed below:

Content Characteristics: One of the most significant factors in the virality of content is its intrinsic appeal. Content that is emotionally engaging, humorous, or controversial tends to perform well. Research indicates that content eliciting strong emotional responses, such as surprise or amusement, is more likely to be shared (Berger & Milkman, 2012). For instance, a study published in the Journal of Marketing Research found that emotionally charged content is more likely to be shared across social media due to its impact on the viewer's emotional state, prompting them to share it with others (Berger, 2011). Additionally, content that includes visually appealing elements, such as striking images or videos, tends to capture more attention and is shared more widely (Kumar et al., 2016).

Algorithmic Amplification: Social media platforms utilize sophisticated algorithms to determine what content appears on users' feeds. These algorithms prioritize content based on various factors, including user engagement, relevance, and recency. For example, Facebook's algorithm is designed to maximize user engagement by promoting posts that generate high levels of interaction (Vanderbilt, 2018). As a result, content that quickly garners likes, comments, and shares is more likely to be shown to a larger audience, creating a feedback loop that can lead to viral spread. Similarly, platforms like Twitter use engagement metrics to prioritize tweets, amplifying content that receives high interaction rates (Mozur, 2018).

Network Effects and User Behaviour: Social media's networked nature plays a crucial role in the rapid dissemination of content. When users with large followings engage with or share content, it can quickly reach a vast audience. This phenomenon is further amplified by the social dynamics of online communities, where influencers and trendsetters play a pivotal role in accelerating content spread. According to a study in Nature Communications, the interconnected nature of social networks and the presence of influential nodes (i.e., users with extensive reach) significantly contribute to the speed at which content goes viral (Bakshy et al., 2015). Moreover, the ease of sharing and re-sharing content facilitates its spread, as users often amplify content by reposting or engaging with it in various ways.

Platform Features and User Incentives: The features and incentives provided by social media platforms also contribute to viral content spread. For instance, platforms often incorporate features that encourage user engagement, such as notifications, trending topics, and interactive elements (Zeng & Wei, 2021). These features create a sense of urgency and social validation, motivating users to engage with and share content more actively. Additionally, gamification elements, like badges and leaderboards, can drive competitive behaviour among users, further enhancing the likelihood of content going viral (Deterding et al., 2011).

Recent Trends and Developments: Recent trends in social media, such as the rise of short-form video content on platforms like TikTok, illustrate how evolving content formats can influence virality. TikTok's algorithm, for example, emphasizes personalized content discovery, showing users videos that align with their interests and previous interactions (Montag et al., 2021). This personalized approach increases the likelihood of content reaching users who are most likely to engage with it, further accelerating its spread.

Spread of viral content influence on online behaviour and information sharing
The spread of viral content has a profound influence on online behaviour and information sharing. Viral content, characterized by its rapid and widespread distribution across social networks and digital platforms, affects how information is consumed, shared, and acted upon online.

Influence on Online Behaviour

Increased Engagement and Interaction: Viral content often leads to heightened engagement among users. Studies have shown that users are more likely to interact with and share content that has gone viral due to its perceived popularity and relevance (Bakhshi et al., 2023). The "social proof" effect, where people tend to follow the behaviour of others, plays a significant role in this behaviour (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2023).

Emotional Response and Sharing Patterns: Content that elicits strong emotional responses, such as amusement, shock, or awe, is more likely to be shared. Research by Berger and Milkman (2023) highlights that emotional content drives higher levels of sharing because emotions like awe and anger create a sense of urgency and personal involvement, prompting users to share with their network.

Behavioural Contagion: Viral content can lead to behavioural contagion, where users adopt behaviours or beliefs that are reflected in the viral content. A study by Jaffe and Hoffman (2024) indicates that viral trends can influence user behaviour, including consumer purchasing decisions and political opinions, by creating a bandwagon effect.

Influence on Information Sharing

Spread and Reach of Information: Viral content spreads rapidly through social networks, amplifying its reach beyond traditional media channels. Recent research by Sweeney et al. (2024) demonstrates that the virality of content often correlates with its ability to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, reaching a larger and more diverse audience.

Misinformation and Echo Chambers: The rapid spread of viral content also includes misinformation and disinformation. Pomerantsev and Weiss (2023), reveal that false information can spread just as quickly as true information due to the same mechanisms of emotional engagement and sensationalism that drive virality. This contributes to the formation of echo chambers where users are exposed primarily to information that reinforces their existing beliefs.

Algorithmic Amplification: Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok use algorithms to promote viral content, which can skew information dissemination. Zhang et al. (2024) argue that algorithms often prioritize content with high engagement metrics, which can lead to the amplification of sensational or divisive content.

Potential consequences of the rapid spread of viral content to individuals and society

The rapid spread of viral content has significant consequences for both individuals and society. These effects span various domains, including psychological well-being, misinformation, social dynamics, and public discourse.

Psychological Impact on Individuals: The rapid spread of viral content can profoundly impact individual psychological well-being. Content that goes viral often includes emotionally charged material, which can lead to increased stress or anxiety for individuals who engage with it extensively. According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2023), constant exposure to viral content, particularly distressing or sensational content, can exacerbate mental health issues, including anxiety and depression. The pressure to stay updated and the emotional toll from interacting with distressing material can negatively affect users' overall mental health.

Misinformation and Disinformation: One of the most pressing consequences of viral content is the spread of misinformation and disinformation. The same mechanisms that drive content virality—such as emotional engagement and sensationalism—can also facilitate the rapid dissemination of false information. Studies by Pomerantsev and Weiss (2023) highlight how misinformation can spread just as quickly as accurate information, leading to widespread misconceptions and confusion. This can undermine public trust in credible sources and distort informed decision-making on critical issues.

Formation of Echo Chambers: Viral content can contribute to the formation and reinforcement of echo chambers, where individuals are exposed predominantly to information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs. Barberá et al. (2023) believe that viral content often gets amplified within like-minded groups, creating a feedback loop that strengthens partisan or ideological divides. This echo chamber effect can limit individuals' exposure to diverse perspectives and exacerbate polarization in society.

Influence on Social Behaviour and Norms: The virality of content can shape social behaviour and norms. Viral trends often set new social standards or behaviours, which can be adopted widely across different communities. Berger and Milkman (2023) indicate that viral content can influence trends in fashion, language, and even political opinions. This rapid shift in social norms can lead to both positive innovations and negative consequences, depending on the nature of the viral content.

Impact on Public Discourse: The virality of content can significantly impact public discourse. Content that goes viral often prioritizes sensationalism over nuance, which can degrade the quality of public discussions. Sweeney et al. (2024),maintain that the amplification of extreme or controversial viewpoints can crowd out more moderate or reasoned perspectives, leading to a polarized public sphere. This dynamic can hinder constructive dialogue and contribute to societal division.

Economic Consequences: The spread of viral content can also have economic implications. Businesses and marketers often leverage viral trends to drive engagement and sales. However, this can create volatile market conditions where trends rapidly shift, impacting brand strategies and

consumer behaviour. Chen et al. (2024) demonstrate that while viral marketing can lead to short-term gains, it can also result in unpredictable consumer behaviour and market instability.

Privacy and Data Security*:* Finally, the spread of viral content raises concerns about privacy and data security. The algorithms that facilitate the virality of content often collect extensive data on user interactions and preferences. This data collection can lead to privacy breaches and misuse of personal information. Zuboff (2023) discuss how data-driven algorithms used to promote viral content can compromise user privacy and contribute to surveillance practices, raising ethical and security concerns.

Strategies can be developed to mitigate the negative consequences of viral content on social media platforms

Mitigating the negative consequences of viral content on social media platforms requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the root causes of these issues. Strategies can focus on improving content moderation, enhancing user education, refining algorithms, and fostering transparency.

Enhancing Content Moderation*:* Effective content moderation is crucial for mitigating the spread of harmful or misleading viral content. Platforms can implement more rigorous moderation policies and invest in both human moderators and advanced artificial intelligence (AI) tools to identify and address problematic content. According to Frischlich et al. (2024), employing a combination of AI and human review can improve the accuracy of content moderation, reducing the prevalence of misinformation and harmful content.

Promoting Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship: Educating users about media literacy and digital citizenship can help individuals critically evaluate the content they encounter and share. Programs that teach users how to identify misinformation, understand algorithmic biases, and recognise emotional manipulation can empower them to make more informed decisions. McDougall et al. (2023) emphasize that media literacy initiatives significantly enhance users' ability to discern credible information from misleading content.

Refining Algorithms for Content Distribution*:* Social media platforms refine their algorithms to prioritize the quality and reliability of content over sensationalism. By adjusting algorithms to promote content from credible sources and reducing the visibility of misleading or harmful content, platforms can mitigate the amplification of viral misinformation. Zhang et al. (2024) suggest that algorithmic adjustments can decrease the spread of false information and improve the overall quality of content users encounter.

Increasing Transparency and Accountability*:* Transparency about content moderation practices and algorithmic decisions can build trust and accountability. Platforms should provide

explanations of how content is moderated, how algorithms determine what users see, and how users can appeal moderation decisions. Enli and Syvertsen (2023) highlight that transparency in these areas can enhance users' trust and compliance with platform policies.

Supporting Research and Collaboration: Encouraging research into the effects of viral content and collaborating with academic and industry experts can help platforms develop more effective strategies for managing content. Collaborative research can lead to innovative solutions and best practices for mitigating the negative impacts of viral content. Research by Binns et al. (2024) underscores the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in creating robust strategies for content management.

Encouraging User Reporting and Feedback: Empowering users to report inappropriate or misleading content can enhance community-driven content moderation. Social media platforms should provide accessible reporting tools and actively encourage users to flag problematic content. Kaur et al. (2024) stress that user-reported content moderation is an effective complement to automated systems, improving the detection of harmful content.

Fostering Ethical Design and User Responsibility: Designing platforms with ethical considerations in mind, such as minimizing addictive features and promoting positive engagement, can reduce the potential for viral content to cause harm. Platforms should also promote user responsibility by encouraging thoughtful sharing and engagement. Chou et al. (2024) emphasize that ethical design and user responsibility initiatives can mitigate some of the negative effects associated with viral content.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Relying on descriptive research design the sample size was extracted from three hundred and fifty (350) social media users. The technique used for this study is a simple random sampling technique. The sample size for the study was one hundred and thirty (130) social media content creators and users. The questionnaire was used as the instrument for collecting data. In analyzing the data collected from the field, descriptive statistics specifically tables and mean were used.

The analysis involves a thorough examination of the collected data to identify patterns, trends, and relationships that provide insight into the research questions.

Table 1: Mean Calculation on the Factors that Contribute to the Rapid Spread of Viral Content on Social Media Platforms

S/N	Items	$\bar{x}$	Decision
1.	Emotional Connection	3.51	Accepted
2.	Visual Appeal	3.15	Accepted
3.	Relevance	3.52	Accepted
4.	Social Proof	3.48	Accepted
5.	Convenience	3.38	Accepted
6.	Controversy	3.38	Accepted
7.	Novelty	3.15	Accepted
8.	Humor	3.54	Accepted
9.	Timeliness	2.91	Accepted
10.	Interactive Elements	3.83	Accepted
Grand Mean		3.38	Accepted

From above table 1, the study showed that item 1 was accepted with a mean value (3.51 ≥2.50) that emotional connection was a contributing factor to the rapid spread of viral content on the social media.. Item 2 was accepted with a mean value (3.15 ≥2.50) that visual appeal instigates the spread of viral content rapidly. Item 3 was accepted with a mean value (3.52 ≥2.50) that relevance influences the rapid spread of viral content. Item 4 with a mean value of 3.48 ≥2.50) agreed that social proof is significant in the rapid spread of viral content. Item 5 was accepted with a mean value (3.38 ≥2.50) that convenience stimulates the rapid spread of viral content. Item 6 was accepted with a mean value (3.38 ≥2.50) indicating that controversy induces rapid spread of viral content. Item 7 was accepted with a mean value (3.15 ≥2.50) that novelty pulls out the rapid spread of viral content. Item 8 was accepted with a mean value (3.54 ≥2.50) that humour is a strong factor for the rapid spread of viral content. Item 9 was accepted with a mean value (2.91 ≥2.50) that timeliness supports rapid spread of viral content. Item 10 was accepted with a mean value (2.82 ≥2.50) which shows that interactive elements force up rapid spread of viral content. The grand mean is above the acceptable mean (i.e. 3.38≥ 2.50), the study, therefore, shows that emotional connection, visual appeal, relevance, social proof, convenience, controversy, novelty, humour, timeliness and interactive elements are the factors that contribute to the rapid spread of viral content on social media platforms.

Table 2: Mean Calculation on the Spread of Viral Content Influence Online Behaviour and Information Sharing

S/N	Items	$\bar{x}$	Decision
1.	When I come across a viral post, I am more likely to share it with my friends and family	3.62	Accepted
2.	The spread of viral content on social media has increased my online engagement.	3.37	Accepted
3.	Viral content on social media has led me to share more information and opinions online.	3.19	Accepted
4.	When I see a viral post, I am more likely to click on links and watch videos to know more about the post.	3.20	Accepted
5.	I have noticed that my online friends and followers are more likely to engage with viral content and share it with others.	3.16	Accepted
6.	Viral content on social media has led me to follow new accounts or influencers who share similar interests and topics.	3.47	Accepted
7.	The spread of viral content on social media has influenced my online communication style in terms of using more emojis.	2.97	Accepted
Grand Mean		3.28	Accepted

The table 2 above shows that item 1 was accepted with a mean value (3.62 ≥2.50) suggesting that when they come across a viral post, they are more likely to share it with their friends and family. Item 2 was accepted with a mean value (3.37 ≥2.50) which implies that the spread of viral content on social media has increased their online engagement. Item 3 was accepted with a mean value (3.19 ≥2.50) which shows that viral content on social media has led them to share more information and opinions online. Item 4 was agreed with a mean value 3.20 ≥2.50) that when they see a viral post, they are more likely to click on links and watch videos to know more about the post. Item 5 was accepted with a mean value (3.16 ≥2.50) that they have noticed that their online friends and followers are more likely to engage with viral content and share it with others. Item 6 was accepted with a mean value (3.47 ≥2.50) that viral content on social media has led them to follow new accounts or influencers who share similar interests and topics. Item 7 was accepted with a mean value (3.97 ≥2.50) that the spread of viral content on social media has influenced their online communication style in terms of using more emojis. Since the grand mean is above the acceptable mean (i.e. 3.28≥ 2.50), the study therefore shows that the spread of viral content influence online behaviour and information sharing with the tendency that social media users are more likely to share viral content with their friends and family, viral content increased users online engagement, it led users to share more information and opinions online, users tend to click on links and watch videos to know more about the post, friends and followers are more likely to engage

with viral content and share it with others, viral content led users to follow new accounts or influencers who share similar interests and topics and that the spread of viral content on social media has influenced users' online communication style in terms of using more emojis.

Table 3: Mean Calculation on the Potential Consequences of the Rapid Spread of Viral Content for Individuals and Society

S/N	Items	$\bar{x}$	Decision
1.	Rapid spread of viral content lead to dissemination of false information which causes harm to individuals and society.	3.38	Accepted
2.	Rapid spread of viral content may lead to feelings of anxiety and stress in some individuals	3.25	Accepted
3.	Rapid spread of viral content increased social media addiction.	3.52	Accepted
4.	Rapid spread of viral content may have a negative impact on mental health for some individuals.	3.09	Accepted
5.	Rapid spread of viral content can cause individuals to feel anxious and stressed due to the constant stream of alarming information.	3.04	Accepted
Grand Mean		3.26	Accepted

From the above table 3, the study showed that item 1 was accepted with a mean value (3.38 ≥2.50) which means that rapid spread of viral content leads to dissemination of false information which causes harm to individuals and society. Item 2 was accepted with a mean value (3.25 ≥2.50) that rapid spread of viral content may lead to feelings of anxiety and stress in some individuals. Item 3 was accepted with a mean value (3.52 ≥2.50) that rapid spread of viral content increased social media addiction. Item 4 was agreed with a mean value 3.09 ≥2.50) that rapid spread of viral content may have a negative impact on mental health for some individuals. Item 5 was accepted with a mean value (3.04 ≥2.50) that rapid spread of viral content can cause individuals to feel anxious and stressed due to the constant stream of alarming information. Since the grand mean is above the acceptable mean (i.e. 3.26≥ 2.50), the study therefore shows that the potential consequences of the rapid spread of viral content to individuals and society include dissemination of false information which causes harm to individuals and society, feelings of anxiety and stress, increased in social media addiction, negative impact on mental health for some individuals and it can cause individuals to feel anxious and stressed due to the constant stream of alarming information.

Table 4: Mean Calculation on Strategies can be developed to mitigate the Negative Consequences of Viral Content on Social Media Platforms

S/N	Items	$\bar{x}$	Decision
1.	Implementation of stricter moderation policies to reduce the spread of viral content	2.27	Accepted
2.	Prioritize user-generated content moderation to reduce the spread of harmful information.	2.91	Accepted
3.	Develop algorithms that detect and suppress misinformation and disinformation.	3.02	Accepted
4.	Governments' regulation on social media companies to ensure they take responsibility for the content they host.	3.61	Accepted
5.	Providing users with tools to report and flag suspicious or harmful content.	3.73	Accepted
Grand Mean		3.11	Accepted

From the above table 4, the study showed that item 1 was accepted with a mean value (2.27 ≥2.50) that implementation of stricter moderation policies to reduce the spread of viral content. Item 2 was accepted with a mean value (2.91 ≥2.50) that prioritize user-generated content moderation to reduce the spread of harmful information. Item 3 was accepted with a mean value (3.02 ≥2.50) that develop algorithms that detect and suppress misinformation and disinformation. Item 4 was accepted with a mean value 3.61 ≥2.50) that governments' regulation on social media companies to ensure they take responsibility for the content they host. Item 5 was accepted with a mean value (3.73 ≥2.50) that providing users with tools to report and flag suspicious or harmful content. Since the grand mean is above the acceptable mean (i.e. 3.11≥2.50), the study therefore shows that the strategies that can be developed to mitigate the negative consequences of viral content on social media platforms include implementing stricter moderation policies, prioritizing user-generated content moderation, developing algorithms that detect and suppress misinformation and disinformation, governments' regulation on social media companies to ensure they take responsibility for the content they host and providing users with tools to report and flag suspicious or harmful content.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings shows that emotional connection, visual appeal, relevance, social proof, convenience, controversy, novelty, humour, timeliness and interactive elements are the factors that contribute to the rapid spread of viral content on social media platforms. This is consistent with the study of Kensinger, (2007) that emotional stimuli are more likely to be remembered and shared than information. Research has also shown that people are more likely to engage with content that is visually appealing (Kotler, 2003).

Findings show that the spread of viral content influence online behaviour and information sharing with the tendency that social media users are more likely to share viral content with their friends and family, viral content increased users online engagement, it led users to share more information and opinions online, users tend to click on links and watch videos to know more about the post, friends and followers are more likely to engage with viral content and share it with others, viral content led users to follow new accounts or influencers who share similar interests and topics and that the spread of viral content on social media has influenced users' online communication style in terms of using more emojis. The tendency for users to share viral content is linked to several behavioural patterns. For instance, users are more inclined to click on links and watch videos related to viral posts to gain further insights or entertainment. This heightened engagement often leads to a broader dissemination of information, as users feel compelled to pass on intriguing or engaging content to others within their social circles (Smith, 2023). Moreover, viral content has been shown to affect the nature of online interactions. Friends and followers of users are more likely to engage with and share viral posts, creating a ripple effect that enhances the visibility and impact of such content. As users interact with viral content, they are also more prone to follow new accounts or influencers who align with their interests or the themes of the viral posts (Johnson & Lee, 2024).

Findings indicate that the potential consequences of the rapid spread of viral content to individuals and society include dissemination of false information which causes harm to individuals and society, feelings of anxiety and stress, increased in social media addiction, negative impact on mental health for some individuals and it can cause individuals to feel anxious and stressed due to the constant stream of alarming information. One of the primary concerns is the proliferation of false information. Viral content often includes sensationalist or misleading information that can quickly be accepted as fact by large audiences. This misinformation can have serious repercussions, leading to public confusion, misguided beliefs, and potentially harmful actions. For instance, false health-related claims or fraudulent schemes can directly impact individuals' well-being and safety, while also undermining public trust in reliable sources (Williams & Taylor, 2023).

Findings shows that the strategies that can be developed to mitigate the negative consequences of viral content on social media platforms include implementing stricter moderation policies, prioritizing user-generated content moderation, developing algorithms that detect and suppress misinformation and disinformation, governments' regulation on social media companies to ensure they take responsibility for the content they host and providing users with tools to report and flag suspicious or harmful content. Regulatory frameworks can impose requirements for transparency in content moderation practices and mandate that platforms take proactive steps to manage harmful content. This regulatory approach aims to create a more responsible digital environment where platforms are incentivized to act against detrimental content more effectively (Zuboff, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The influence of viral content is a double-edged sword, characterized by both its potential for widespread information dissemination and its capacity to propagate false or misleading information. Viral content can rapidly amplify messages, both positive and negative, reaching vast audiences in a matter of hours. This speed of dissemination can be beneficial in emergencies or for mobilizing social causes but can also exacerbate the spread of misinformation, heighten social divisions, and create echo chambers where only reinforcing viewpoints are shared. As viral content often outpaces traditional methods of content review and moderation, social media platforms face significant challenges in managing this dynamic landscape. The interplay between user-generated content and platform algorithms necessitates a robust approach to content governance that balances the need for free expression with the imperative to mitigate harm.

Recommendations
Based on findings, the following recommendations were made;
1. Platforms should establish and enforce clear, stringent content moderation policies that address the unique challenges posed by viral content.
2. Development of advanced algorithms should be regularly updated to adapt to evolving tactics used by those spreading false information, and they should work in tandem with human review processes to ensure a balanced approach
3. Governments should establish regulatory frameworks that hold social media companies accountable for the content they host. These regulations should mandate transparency in content moderation practices and require platforms to take proactive measures against harmful content.
4. Users should be provided with robust tools to report and flag suspicious or harmful content.

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