

Viral Propagation of Consumer- or Marketer-generated Messages

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Biographical Note

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Keywords

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Viral propagation of consumer- or marketer-generated messages has generated much excitement in recent times not least because of its manifestation in novel and high-profile phenomena such as viral videos, consumer-generated content, and flash mobs. Take the example of Thessa's birthday. Like any other digital native (Tapscott 2009), the German girl had created an event page *Mein 16!* on a social networking site inviting her friends to the birthday party. Much to her horror, more than 1,500 strangers showed up outside her house on the day of the

event alongside 100 police officers who were summoned to keep the flash mob under control. It turns out that Thessa had inadvertently listed her party as a public event and the invitation had gone viral. The event received 2,500 responses from random users of the site before Thessa realized her oversight and removed the invitation. But by then, clones of the event page spotting her address and other details had emerged and went on to garner over 15,000 responses.

Given the recent prevalence of similar examples, it is easy to forget that viral propagation—the repeated transmission of a message or idea via peer-to-peer dissemination—has been an age-old phenomenon. Legends, folklores, rumors, and gossips provide longstanding precedents of virally propagated narratives. We can also trace the analogue precursors of digital viral media (videos, emails, etc.) to the likes of chain letters and the Samizdat (grassroots literature covertly produced and passed on among known associates to avoid censorship in the Soviet era). The difference is that viral propagation is more visible and extensive in the digital context as the dissemination of messages is much faster, more scalable, and better coordinated. Notably, the mass adoption of media-sharing platforms and social network sites recently has made it easier for marketers and consumers alike to quickly disseminate their messages to an exponentially growing audience via peer-referrals.

Despite more favorable conditions for viral propagation in the digital context, viral propagation remains an elusive phenomenon that we can neither predict nor control. As much as digital channels help to multiply the impact of viral propagation, they also accentuate the potential fallout from poorly executed viral campaigns or unintended viral messages—as Thessa’s birthday shows. The unpredictability of viral propagation coupled with its increasing prevalence and impact on public discourse and consumer behaviors warrant a better understanding its nature and process. Toward this end, a large corpus of empirical work across

several disciplines has proffered many determinants and characteristics of viral propagation. However, the lack of an integrative overview of this vast body of work has left us with a fragmented and limited knowledge of the phenomenon. The goal of this chapter, therefore, is to facilitate further research and theoretical advancement on viral propagation by explicating its conceptual foundations and the factors that shape its manifestation in the digital context.

The chapter comprises two main sections. The first section synthesizes and simplifies a broad range of prior literature to highlight the most pertinent theoretical perspectives of the nature and process of viral propagation. Four perspectives stand out: epidemiological, emotional, communicational, and cultural. The second section reflects on viral propagation in the age of digital technologies and rapidly evolving consumption patterns. It interrogates the impact of technologies at both micro and macro level aspects on the process of viral propagation and the way technology affords the transformation of consumers' individual actions to collectively meaningful outcomes. Areas for further research are explored in the conclusion.

THEORIES OF VIRAL PROPAGATION

The phenomenon of viral propagation has attracted considerable multidisciplinary research interests—most notably, sociology of collective behaviors, psychology of rumors, anthropology of cultural diffusion, and consumer research of word-of-mouth behaviors. Questions regarding viral propagation can be broadly summarized in terms of what, who, when, where, why, and how: *what* gets propagated (types of message that frequently become propagated); *who* is involved in the propagation (opinion leaders, mavens, early adopters, etc.); *when* does viral propagation arise (the circumstances leading to the generation and spread of messages); *where* does viral propagation occur (social networks, online communities, etc.); *why* do individuals propagate

messages (their motives, goals, and desires); and *how* are messages propagated (the mode of transmission). Prior studies on viral propagation can be loosely organized by their focus on one of the following primary units of analysis—messages, individuals, networks, and contexts. The approach in examining viral propagation in terms of the message that is propagated has been to identify the attributes of messages that induce consumers to pass them on. This is frequently coupled with the approach by which viral propagation is understood in terms of the psychological antecedents and consequences of individuals who pass on messages. Turning to the social networks where messages are propagated, the approach has been to investigate how social relations affect the diffusion of messages. Finally, in terms of the cultural contexts that precipitate viral propagation, the approach is to appreciate consumers’ meaning-making activities in relation to the messages being propagated. The respective modes of viral propagation are: social epidemic, emotional sharing, interpersonal communication, and cultural representation (see Table 24.1).

Viral Propagation as Social Epidemic

The social epidemic metaphor is perhaps the most commonly used descriptor for the way messages or ideas spread via peer-to-peer dissemination. Underlying this metaphor is the analogy

TABLE 24.1. Different Theoretical Perspectives of Viral Propagation.

	Memetic	Emotional	Communicational	Cultural
Focus on	What	Why	Who	How
Unit of analysis	Viral messages	Individuals	Social networks	Cultural contexts
Determinant	Contagious thoughts	Emotional valence	Relational ties	Social relevance

What is transmitted	Memes	Emotions	Information	Meanings
Mode of transmission	Social epidemic	Emotional sharing	Interpersonal communication	Cultural representation
Key references	Dawkins 1976; Blackmore 1999	Heath et al. 2001; Festinger 1957; Heath 1996; Harber and Cohen 2005	Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Rogers 1962	Sperber 1996; de Certeau 1984; Jenkins 1992; Bartlett 1932

between the way ideas and messages diffuse through public consciousness and the way diseases spread during epidemics (Gladwell 2000). This notion is most keenly developed by the proponents of memetics (Blackmore 1999; Dennett 1995). Originally conceived as the cultural equivalent of genes (Dawkins 1976), memes provide a useful catch-all term for all sorts of messages, ideas, behaviors, or cultural elements that are imitated by consumers. Proponents of memetics argue that memes represent contagious thoughts (Lynch 1996) or mind viruses (Dawkins 1993) which promote their own replication by inducing their hosts (the minds of individuals) to propagate them. An example is the St. Jude chain letter (Goodenough and Dawkins 1994) which instigates recipients to pass it on by providing anecdotal accounts of good luck befalling recipients who send copies of the letter to others and bad luck for those who do not. The memetic proposition that viral messages possess certain attributes that promote their propagation is especially helpful in legitimatizing the art of designing messages that are more likely to be passed on by consumers.

The research strategy in this area is to identify the specific quality or stickiness of messages (Gladwell 2000) that would spur consumers to pass them on. In an exploratory content analysis of 235 television advertisements and 266 viral advertisements, Porter and Golan (2006) aver that viral advertising relies on provocative content (sex, nudity, and violence) to motivate unpaid peer

communication of persuasive messages from identified sponsors. While the small handful of published research that examines the viral attributes of messages clearly draws upon the assumptions of memetics, few studies explicitly associate themselves with the meme concept. Instead, these largely practitioner-oriented studies rely on message strategy models as the theoretical framework in a bid to inform creative strategies in viral advertising. Applying Taylor's (1999) six-segment message strategy wheel, Golan and Zaidner (2008) analyzed the creative strategies of 360 viral advertisements and note the overwhelming use of ego-oriented appeals involving themes such as humor and sexuality. In an analysis of 102 video ads from UK and US which were shown on television and online, Southgate et al. (2010) found that the volume of video ad views per week can be correlated to advertising pre-test measures on enjoyment, involvement, and branding. The authors further propose three other creative strategies that contribute to viral viewing—the distinctiveness of the ad, the role of celebrities in spreading the message, and buzz-worthiness of the content (hilariously funny, edgy, gripping, or sexy).

Apart from a few indirect references, the memetics approach has not caught on with mainstream academic researchers. This is largely because of its highly unrealistic and ambiguous ontological assumptions that cultural ideas can be divided up into discrete and independent entities that are replicated and propagated with a high level of fidelity. The explanatory power of the memetic approach is further curtailed by its fallacious disregard for the role of individuals who pass on messages as active participants in the propagation process. To merely analyze the content of virally propagated messages without considering how they are interpreted by receivers is to mistakenly assume that these messages possess direct and uniform influence on consumers—assumptions which have been widely discredited by communication scholars

several decades ago (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Lazarsfeld et al. 1944). Unlike biological or computer viruses, viral messages are rarely propagated by their human hosts unintentionally. People are also likely to modify or add to the content of a message before passing it on to someone else. Even if we could discount human agency and individual differences, it is spurious to claim that themes and other content characteristics identified through post-hoc analysis of messages that had gone viral constitute message attributes that could predict viral propagation. So while the social epidemics metaphor offers an intuitive description of the spread of messages through consumer-to-consumer propagation, the examination of message attributes alone does not offer a convincing theoretical account of viral propagation. Just as sexual selection and environmental factors determine the propagation of genetic materials, individuals and situations play a determining role in the selection and propagation of viral messages.

Viral Propagation as Emotional Sharing

The emotional sharing perspective of viral propagation refers to the idea that individuals are driven to generate and spread certain messages in response to the emotional valence of an event, situation, or consumption object. The earliest proponent of this notion is Prasad (1935) who proposes that a typical situation that leads to the generation and propagation of rumors: (a) sets up an emotional disturbance; (b) is of an uncommon and unfamiliar type; (c) contains many aspects unknown to the individuals affected; (d) contains several unverifiable factors; and (e) is of group interest. While many scholars have echoed the similar idea that rumors arise and propagate in response to uncertainties or anxieties (Allport and Postman 1945; Rosnow 1991), it was Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance that inspired the development of emotional discrepancy theories. The theory of cognitive dissonance posits that people are motivated to change their cognitive beliefs or behaviors in order to reduce the tension caused by

holding conflicting ideas simultaneously. It originally proposed by Festinger (1957) to explain the circulation of rumors after an earthquake. He suggests that people who escaped the earthquake unharmed began to circulate rumors about unforeseeable calamities in order to reduce their unjustified feelings of fear. Expanding on the theory of cognitive dissonance, emotional arousal (or discrepancy) theories propose that emotions arise when information violates expectations. To resolve the event or belief discrepancies, people are prompted to share and talk about their experiences of the situations from which the emotions arise. Harber and Cohen (2005) aver that this intrapsychic need to share emotional experiences with others drives viral propagation of messages.

Several studies have provided empirical support for the emotional driving force of expectation-violations on forwarding behaviors in a range of contexts. Heath (1996) demonstrates that in domains that were emotionally positive people prefer to pass along news that was exaggeratedly positive and in domains that were emotionally negative the preference was for exaggeratedly negative news. Similarly, Phelps et al. (2004) found that email messages that spark strong emotion—humor, fear, sadness, or inspiration—are most likely to be forwarded. They further observed

that emails containing very humorous jokes, touchingly sad stories, or particularly inspirational messages meet the threshold of participants who seldom forward viral emails. In an elaborate study of the role of emotions in successful viral marketing campaigns, Dobeles et al. (2007) examined consumers' emotional responses and subsequent forwarding behavior on messages containing six emotions—surprise, joy, sadness, anger, fear, and disgust. Surprise was identified as a common emotion across the different viral marketing campaigns; it is suggested that the emotion has to be combined with at least one of the other five emotions in order to generate

forwarding behaviors. More recently, Brown et al. (2010) contend that comedic violence in advertisements elicits greater emotional involvement with the message and higher pass-along probability.

Besides providing the motivational drive for propagating messages, the emotional sharing perspective also suggests that emotions themselves are propagated (Rimé 2009). This emotional contagion is said to occur when both sender and receivers jointly experience a similar emotion (Howard and Gengler 2001). Pointing to the socializing function of shared emotions, Heath et al. (2001) propose that memes are frequently selected and retained because they evoke an emotional reaction that is widely shared across people. They argue that consumers may choose to pass along certain messages that generate emotions not because they enjoy consuming the emotion directly but because the shared emotion enhances their social interactions. For instance, Holt (1995) alludes to the role of shared emotions in consumption practices that involve communing with other consumers and appreciating a consumption experience. In a similar spirit, re-telling stories that tap onto certain emotions allows consumers to entertain or sustain the listener's attention and enhance their mutual relationships (Guerin and Miyazaki 2006).

Viral Propagation as Interpersonal Communication

The communication flow metaphor for viral propagation references much of consumer research on diffusion of ideas and messages where the phenomenon is treated as a special case of interpersonal communication transfer of information in a given social system. Viral propagation is regarded as runaway word-of-mouth referrals. The conceptual foundation for this perspective is Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) seminal work on the role of personal influence in mediating the direct effects of mass media messages on consumers. According to their two-step flow model, information flows from mass media to individuals (opinion leaders) who then pass it on to others

along with their own interpretations. The two-step flow model has inspired the field of diffusion research (Gatignon and Robertson 1985; Rogers 1962) which has informed us of the role of social networks and influential individuals on the adoption and spread of ideas and messages.

Diffusion research has helped to deepen our understanding of viral propagation in three areas. The first area pertains to factors that influence individuals to propagate messages. Viral propagation or word-of-mouth behavior constitute a form of social exchange (Gatignon and Robertson 1986) which is part of consumers' everyday communicational and relational practices (Carl 2006). Many scholars have pointed to the instrumental value of providing information or exchanging resources in the course of peer-to-peer dissemination of messages such as rumors (Rosnow 1991), urban legends (Donavan et al. 1999, 2001), and folklores (Brunvand 1981). For example, Allport and Postman (1945) argue that rumors spread because people seek to understand and simplify complicated events. Rumors, therefore, tend to develop when there is an unsatisfied demand for news and disappear when the demand drops or supply becomes adequate (Shibutani 1966). Individuals who are more individualistic or altruistic tend to propagate more messages than others (Ho and Dempsey 2010). In particular, consumers with stronger needs for uniqueness tend to avoid propagating positive word-of-mouth of their possession as it reduces its uniqueness (Cheema and Kaikati 2010).

The second area is related to the characteristics of certain groups of individuals who are influential in viral propagation. These influential individuals are traditionally conceived as opinion leaders and are considered to exert the most influence during the evaluation stage of adoption (Everett M. Rogers 1962). Scholars have since developed several nuances of these influential individuals. One leading prototype, for example, is market mavens who possess information about many things and frequently initiate discussions with and respond to requests

for information from other consumers (Feick and Price 1987). Unlike traditional opinion leaders who are identified according to product categories and domains (Westbrook & Fornell 1979), market mavens' knowledge and expertise—and therefore influence—is not product specific. The influential role of selected individuals in viral propagation, however, does not necessarily depend on their knowledge or expertise; it can also be derived from their propensity to engage with other consumers (Goldenberg et al. 2009). Through psychological profiling of 656 social media consumers, Yeo (Forthcoming) avers that relationally-oriented consumers (who are more likely to propagate an interactive service through their engagement with other consumers) possess distinct consumption goals and personality profiles from traditional innovators (who are more active media users and tend to be early adopters). Taking the concept of opinion leadership further, Gladwell (2000) argues that there is not one group of opinion leaders but three sets of individuals that enable viral propagation: those who provide the message (Mavens), those who spread the message (Connectors), and those who persuade others to act on the message (Salesmen). However, Watts and Dodds (2007) downplay the role of opinion leaders in viral propagation, arguing that large cascades of influence are driven not by influentials but by a critical mass of easily influenced individuals.

The third area relates to the impact of social network characteristics on the flow of information. Two concepts from this area of research are particularly useful for our understanding of viral propagation beyond a small group of individuals—strength of ties and tipping point (or threshold). The strength of social ties among individuals refers to the combination of frequency of contact, emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocity between individuals (Granovetter 1973). Diffusion researchers have observed that although strong social ties are more likely to be influential in consumers' decision and behaviors, weak ties play an

important bridging function in allowing information to travel across distinct subgroups in the social system (Brown and Reingen 1987; Rogers 1995). For the viral propagation of a message to be sustainable, the average number of persons introduced to the message by each person has to exceed 1—the epidemic tipping point. Once the number of people passing on the message reaches a certain critical mass (which is context-dependent), the bandwagon effect sets in and there is an increased tendency for people to spread the message simply because others have already done so (Granovetter 1978).

Viral Propagation as Cultural Representation

The research reviewed so far has suggested that individuals frequently pass on viral messages because they can emotionally connect to them and this is typically related to some amusing or controversial elements that the messages contain. Further, the relations with others in one's social network have a strong bearing on passing on behaviors because they directly influence the perceived importance and credibility of the message. Studies supporting these conjectures, however, typically make two untenable assumptions: (1) individuals' understandings of the viral message are treated as almost identical throughout a group, and (2) the message is assumed to be minimally transformed as it is virally propagated. In so doing, these studies fail to consider how meanings are created, evolved, and spread among consumers as the message propagates. The cultural representation perspective addresses this oversight by conceiving the viral propagation of

a message as a series of cultural representations of that message. It entails the examination of how the virally propagated message is cognized and communicated among participants.

The pioneering work of this perspective is Bartlett's (1932) serial reproduction experiments which demonstrate that as items are passed about from one participant to another, participants

develop a conventionalized representation of the items propagated. When asked to pass on seemingly meaningless or ambiguous drawings, participants tend to represent the drawings as something more meaningful. The concept of collective sense-making during viral propagation was further developed by Allport and Postman (1945) who found that as rumors were passed on, they tend to become leveled (made more concise), sharpened (uninteresting details left out), and assimilated (modified for coherence and relevance). We can draw a theoretical parallel with de Certeau's (1984) notion of reading as poaching which describes the way readers take away only elements that seems useful or pleasurable to them. Extending the poaching metaphor from reading to writing, Jenkins (1992) suggests that the way fans select only the most useful and pleasurable meanings from original works in their re-presentations of those works constitutes textual poaching.

The cultural representation approach offers a more contextually-sensitive and consumer-centered alternative to the memetic content analysis of viral messages. This emerging line of research distinguishes itself from meme- and information-centered approaches by emphasizing the salience of consumer participation through examinations of creative activity that occurred around these messages and how they became influenced by social and cultural contexts at the time of production (Burgess 2008; Yeo 2010). In this way, a highly significant quality for going viral is based on how the item becomes elaborated within the group it is popular with. This entails examining what individuals find salient, meaningful, and useful about the item that is being virally propagated (i.e., its social relevance and cultural resonance). For example, Burgess (2008) observed that successful viral videos have textual hooks or key signifiers that become part of the available cultural repertoire of vernacular video via being selected a number of times for repetition.

VIRAL PROPAGATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Over past few decades, we have witnessed the disruptive changes that the rise of the digital age brings to almost every aspect of our everyday lives. Benkler (2006) describes them as a series of changes in technologies, economic organization, and social practices in a networked information environment which result in better democratic participation and greater scope for cooperative, nonmarket production of information and culture. The popularity and widespread growth of consumer-generated contents and peer-distribution channels that rival those of newspapers and broadcasters illustrate the rise of a new media landscape where traditional media institutions wield little direct control. The dynamics of media production, distribution and consumption have changed significantly with the prevalence of digital technologies. For instance, blogging and citizen journalism have changed the way news are gathered, reported and distributed. Similarly, media-sharing, consumer-ratings, and peer-recommendations facilitated by social media play an increasingly important role in not only influencing the box office success of films but the way they are produced. But more significantly, we are witnessing a significant shift from the conventional broadcast model—a primarily top-down process where professionally produced contents are transmitted to mass audiences—to the viral propagation model—an unprecedented increase in non-commercial, peer production and distribution of media contents from the bottom-up.

Communication technologies have been regarded as exerting a pervasive influence on a wide range of human behaviors. Benkler (2006) suggests that “different patterns of adoption and use can result in very different social relations that emerge around a technology” (p. 12). In reflecting the implications of the communication technologies for viral propagation, this section

focuses on the overlapping dimensions of cultural practices and technological affordances from two directions: macro-to-micro and micro-to-macro. The macro-to-micro perspective illustrates the effects of macro-level technological changes on the practices of individual consumers.

Convergence is a macro-level technological characteristic generally thought to be associated with media usage patterns. It is used to describe the ability of different platforms to carry similar kinds of services, or the coming together of consumer devices such as telephone, television and personal computers because of digitization. Elaborating on these changes, Jenkins (2006) asserts that the convergence of different media systems—production tools, distribution networks, and services—has helped to enable new forms of consumer participation and collaboration, and harness the collective intelligence of participants. The digitalization of communication technologies is said to enable better communication capacities, namely speed, reach, storage capacity, accuracy, selectivity, interactivity, stimuli richness, and complexity (van Dijk 2006). While digitization and improved communication capacities facilitate better coordination of activities among groups of individuals, they also contribute to increasing uncertainty and a multiplicity of choices for consumers. This multiplicity of choices, in turn, prompt consumers to become more motivated in participating in sharing activities, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action in pursuit of authenticating experiences (Arnould and Price 2000).

Rafaeli et al. (2005) argue that macro-level changes associated with technological innovations necessarily arise from prior processes on micro, individual, group, and community levels. Examining the influences of technology at the micro-level and exploring how they lead to changes at the macro-level are necessary for a better informed understanding of the role of technology in facilitating viral propagation. The micro-to-macro perspective takes us to the availability of digital platforms and services that leverage consumer participation and aggregate,

organize, and coordinate their activities to deliver meaningful collective outcomes. The user interface can play an explicit role in encouraging greater consumer participation by signaling the opportunities to engage in actions that could satisfy both individualistic and relational needs. Technologies have not only made communications more efficient—the ubiquity of consumer devices and platforms that affords dialogue has also expanded the boundaries and limitations of connecting with each other (Duck 2007). Because of the ability to embed or recommend content in blogs and social network sites, many consumers inadvertently propagate messages as a result of their participation in these platforms. Boyd et al. (2010) argue that the practices of retweeting—copying and rebroadcasting others’ messages—on Twitter are conversational practices that contribute to a shared conversational context.

Viral propagation in the digital context also enables consumer-generated content to receive wide attention without having to satisfy traditional media or cultural gatekeepers. The accessibility and prevalence of digital authoring tools, media-sharing platforms, and social networking sites afford the means for consumers to easily create and share their content and messages. Benkler (2006) avers that these tools represent “nonmarket, peer-produced alternative sources of filtration and accreditation in place of the market-based alternatives” (p. 8). He explains that in a nonmarket information environment, consumer contributions that are seen as significant would, after initial vetting from local clusters-communities of interest, increasingly make their way to more visible sites where they obtain widespread attention through peer-recommendations. The data management capabilities of social network sites further facilitate the rapid propagation of consumer-generated messages along links established among users, thereby allowing the bandwagon effect to kick in much earlier and lowering the threshold epidemic tipping point for viral propagation. In this way, consumer activities at the micro-level become

transformed into collective outcomes at the macro-level. Design and technology help to coordinate individual consumer activities in ways that regularly facilitate the emergence of these meaningful collective outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Much of consumer and marketing research hitherto has been concerned with questions about who, what, and why of viral propagation but not how. Many studies have sought to examine what viral messages do to consumers but few have questioned what consumers do to viral messages. This may be related to the disproportionate focus on the propagation of marketer-generated messages. Despite the unprecedented growth in consumer co-creation activities in recent times, there remains a paucity of consumer research into the viral propagation of consumer-generated messages. Too much research attention has also been placed on the drivers of viral propagation without due consideration for its consequence. Given the elusiveness of viral propagation, the success of a viral campaign is frequently indicated by merely getting a message to go viral (Watts and Peretti 2007). There has been little effort in understanding the attitudinal effect of viral propagation on consumers. While the diffusion literature has informed us of the persuasiveness of opinion leaders in influencing an individual's selection and subsequent propagation of viral messages, we remain uncertain about the persuasiveness of the messages that are propagated. Yeo (2010) found that an individual's decision to view a viral video on others' recommendation bypasses more diligent information processing which is typically associated with long-term attitude change. How can we adapt the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (Petty and Cacioppo 1981), typically used to research mass media messages, on viral messages?

Although viral propagation has been an age-old phenomenon, its manifestation in the digital age represents a fundamental shift in the way ideas, meanings, and information flow. As mentioned, while the social epidemic metaphor of viral propagation provides an intuitive description of the phenomenon, the epidemiological model of person-to-person message dissemination is not realistic. Much of the research on word-of-mouth communication elaborates on the second stage of Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow model where the top-down flow of communication from mass media is filtered by one-to-one (or one-to-many) communication. Yet, viral propagation in the digital context largely involves the bottom-up and many-to-many flow of communication. There is also the ontological question of what exactly is being transmitted during viral propagation? Even if we unquestioningly accept memes or information as the items that get propagated, we are still left with the untenable assumption that the item is uniformly perceived by consumers or perfectly replicated during viral propagation. By addressing these issues, the meaning-based, cultural representation approach proposed in this chapter offers a potentially fruitful alternative program of viral propagation research.

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