

The Psychology of Viral Trends: Social Identity and Conformity in Short-Form Video Culture

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Abstract

Short-form video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts have given rise to a distinct form of cultural transmission: the viral trend or "challenge," in which large numbers of users replicate a shared behavior, sound, or format within a compressed timeframe. This paper examines viral trend participation through the combined lenses of social identity theory and classic conformity research, arguing that short-form video platforms have created structural conditions — participatory rather than merely observational sharing, algorithmically amplified visibility of in-group behavior, and rapid normative feedback through likes and comments — that intensify identity-based conformity processes relative to earlier social media formats. Building on this literature-grounded framework, the paper proposes an original survey-based study testing whether identity salience and perceived popularity independently predict self-reported trend-participation likelihood among young adults. An illustrative dataset ($N = 220$) is presented to demonstrate the intended statistical approach. The illustrative results suggest that both identity relevance and perceived popularity significantly and independently predict participation likelihood, with perceived popularity showing the stronger effect — consistent with the theoretical emphasis on algorithmically manufactured consensus as a key driver of viral conformity. Implications for platform design and digital literacy education are discussed.

Keywords: social identity theory, conformity, short-form video, TikTok, virality, social media, Generation Z

1. Introduction

In the span of a single week, a dance set to a fifteen-second audio clip, a specific phrase delivered in a specific cadence, or a stylized transition effect can spread from a handful of creators to millions of participants across the globe. This is the defining cultural rhythm of short-form video platforms: not merely the circulation of content, as with earlier social media formats, but the mass replication of behavior. Unlike a retweet or a shared link, participating in a TikTok trend requires the user to perform the trend themselves — to dance the dance, mouth the audio, or attempt the challenge — turning every viewer into a potential co-producer of the very content that drew them in.

This participatory structure raises a specific psychological question: why are viral trends on short-form video platforms so effective at generating mass behavioral replication, often within days? This paper argues that the answer lies at the intersection of two long-established areas of social psychology — social identity theory and classic conformity research — and that short-form video platforms have engineered structural features that intensify both processes simultaneously.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory, originally developed by Tajfel and Turner, proposes that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups, and that people are motivated to maintain a positive and distinctive social identity by favoring behaviors, symbols, and norms associated with their in-group. Applied to digital culture, participation in a viral trend can be understood as a low-cost, high-visibility signal of in-group membership: performing a trend associated with a particular subculture, fandom, or generational identity allows a user to publicly affiliate with that group and to be recognized by other members as a legitimate participant in shared cultural life.

2.2 Conformity and Normative Influence

Classic conformity research, beginning with Asch's line-judgment experiments, demonstrated that individuals will alter their behavior or stated judgments to align with a group, even when the group is objectively incorrect, driven by both informational influence (using the group as a source of information about reality) and normative influence (a desire to be liked and avoid standing out). Deutsch and Gerard's distinction between these two forms of influence is directly relevant to viral trend participation: informational influence operates when high view-counts and participation numbers signal to a user that a trend is popular, entertaining, or safe, while normative influence operates when users adopt a trend specifically to avoid social exclusion or to gain approval within their peer network.

2.3 Deindividuation and the Illusion of Popularity

A further relevant mechanism is what has been described in recent applied analysis as the "illusion of popularity": when users repeatedly encounter a trend across their feed, they infer that the depicted behavior is widely practiced and therefore socially sanctioned, even if their own immediate social circle has not engaged with it. This inference process, amplified by algorithmic curation that surfaces already-popular content to ever-larger audiences, can accelerate conformity beyond what would occur through direct peer observation alone, since the platform itself manufactures the appearance of overwhelming consensus.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Identity Formation and Self-Perception

Recent research examining TikTok's role in identity formation among Generation Z has found that engagement with the platform meaningfully shapes self-perception, body image, and social comparison processes, three constructs considered central to personal identity development during adolescence and emerging adulthood. Complementary work applying self-perception theory to Chinese university students' TikTok use found that identity, attitude change, emotional perception, and civic engagement were the psychological dimensions most strongly shaped by short-video engagement, suggesting the identity-shaping function of trend participation generalizes across cultural contexts.

3.2 Conformity, Risk, and the "Illusion of Popularity"

Applied analyses of TikTok challenge behavior have directly linked viral participation to social conformity mechanisms, noting that when users observe others participating in a challenge, they often interpret the behavior as safe or widely accepted, prompting imitation — an effect described as particularly pronounced among younger users seeking social belonging. This literature further describes a pattern of escalation, in which participants modify or intensify a challenge to stand out within an already-crowded trend, sometimes increasing risk or intensity in the process, alongside a reinforcement

mechanism termed deviancy training, in which online validation rewards increasingly risky trend participation over successive rounds of engagement.

3.3 The Structural Uniqueness of Short-Form Video Virality

Analysis of large-scale viral moments across TikTok, X, and Instagram Reels has identified "collaborative virality": unlike traditional viral content, which spreads primarily through sharing, TikTok-style virality spreads through direct participation, enabled by features such as duetting and stitching. Reported participation rates for successful TikTok trends have been estimated at roughly 47% of viewers, compared to approximately 3% for traditional social media content, consistent with the prediction that lowering the behavioral cost of conformity sharply increases conformity rates.

3.4 Emotional and Multimodal Drivers of Spread

Large-scale analysis of viral content across platforms has identified "micro-universality": content that captures a hyper-specific, idiosyncratic experience which paradoxically feels broadly relatable, allowing viewers to see themselves reflected in a moment not originally created with them in mind. Separately, research analyzing multimodal signals in short-form video content has found that visual and emotional cues often outperform textual sentiment alone in predicting viewership and engagement, suggesting that short-form video's embodied, emotionally legible quality carries independent weight in driving spread.

4. Objectives

1. To test whether identity relevance of a trend predicts self-reported likelihood of participation among young adults.
2. To test whether perceived popularity of a trend predicts participation likelihood, independent of identity relevance.
3. To compare the relative strength of identity relevance versus perceived popularity as predictors of participation.

5. Hypotheses

H1: Identity relevance will significantly positively predict self-reported trend-participation likelihood.

H2: Perceived popularity will significantly positively predict self-reported trend-participation likelihood, independent of identity relevance.

H3: Perceived popularity will be a significantly stronger predictor of participation likelihood than identity relevance.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

A cross-sectional survey design is proposed, in which participants view a series of mocked-up short-form video trend descriptions with experimentally varied identity relevance (high vs. low fit with participants' self-identified subcultural/generational groups) and perceived popularity (high vs. low displayed view/participation counts), rating their likelihood of participating in each after each vignette.

6.2 Participants

A target sample of $N = 220$ young adults aged 18–25, recruited via university participant pools and social media advertisements, is proposed, sufficient for reliable multiple regression analysis with two predictors and their interaction.

6.3 Materials

Trend Vignettes: Eight mocked-up trend descriptions (short text plus a static thumbnail image) varying orthogonally in identity relevance and displayed popularity (view count).

Participation Likelihood Scale: A single-item 7-point scale asking how likely participants would be to try each trend themselves.

Identity Relevance Manipulation Check: A brief measure confirming perceived fit between the trend and the participant's self-identified peer group or subculture.

6.4 Procedure

Participants would view all eight vignettes in randomized order via an online survey platform, rating participation likelihood after each, following informed consent.

6.5 Statistical Analysis

A multiple regression analysis with identity relevance and perceived popularity (and their interaction) as predictors of participation likelihood is proposed as the primary analysis, alongside descriptive statistics and a comparison of standardized coefficients to test H3.

7. Results (Illustrative / Simulated Data)

A simulated sample of $N = 220$ (124 female, 93 male, 3 preferred not to say) was used to illustrate the intended analysis.

7.1 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Range
Identity relevance rating (1–7)	220	4.6	1.5	1–7
Perceived popularity rating (1–7)	220	5.1	1.3	1–7
Participation likelihood (1–7)	220	4.2	1.7	1–7

7.2 Multiple Regression Analysis

Predictor	B	SE	B	t	p
Identity relevance	0.31	0.07	0.27	4.43	< .001
Perceived popularity	0.48	0.08	0.39	6.00	< .001
Identity × Popularity	0.09	0.06	0.08	1.50	.135

The overall regression model was significant, $F(3, 216) = 38.92$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .35$, indicating that identity relevance and perceived popularity together accounted for approximately 35% of the variance in participation likelihood in this illustrative sample. Both identity relevance ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$) and perceived popularity ($\beta = .39$, $p < .001$) were significant independent predictors, supporting H1 and H2. The interaction term was not significant ($p = .135$).

7.3 Comparison of Predictor Strength

A comparison of standardized coefficients indicated that perceived popularity ($\beta = .39$) was a numerically and statistically stronger predictor than identity relevance ($\beta = .27$), $z = 2.14$, $p = .032$, supp-

orting H3.

8. Discussion

The illustrative results are consistent with the theoretical framework developed in Sections 2–3: both identity-expressive motives and algorithmically legible popularity cues independently predict trend-participation intentions, with popularity emerging as the somewhat stronger driver. This pattern would, if confirmed with real data, support the account that platform-manufactured "illusion of popularity" — rather than identity affiliation alone — is the primary engine of mass viral conformity, aligning with the applied literature on TikTok challenge escalation reviewed in Section 3.2 and with the collaborative-virality participation-rate evidence reviewed in Section 3.3.

The non-significant interaction term suggests that, in this illustrative sample, identity relevance and perceived popularity operate as additive rather than multiplicative influences — a trend does not need to be both highly identity-relevant and highly popular to drive participation; either factor alone contributes meaningfully. This would have practical significance for platform design, since it implies that reducing popularity-cue visibility could meaningfully lower conformity-driven participation even for trends with low identity relevance to a given user.

9. Practical Implications

If confirmed with real data, these findings would suggest that platform-level interventions moderating the visibility of raw engagement metrics during a trend's early escalation phase could meaningfully reduce conformity-driven participation, particularly given popularity's stronger predictive weight relative to identity relevance. Digital literacy curricula could usefully teach young users to distinguish their own identity-expressive motives for trend participation from popularity-driven conformity, since the two appear to operate as separable psychological pathways rather than a single undifferentiated impulse.

10. Limitations

As constructed, the results in Section 8 are illustrative and must be replaced with real data before any substantive conclusions are drawn. Once real data collection occurs, anticipated limitations include reliance on self-reported intended behavior rather than observed trend participation, the artificiality of static vignettes relative to the dynamic, algorithmically personalized feeds through which users actually encounter trends, and a convenience sample that may not generalize to the full diversity of short-form video users.

11. Directions for Future Research

Future work would benefit from field studies using real platform data (e.g., partnering with platforms to vary displayed view counts experimentally) rather than static vignettes, and from behavioral rather than self-report outcome measures. Longitudinal designs tracking individual users' trend participation alongside identity and self-esteem measures over time would help clarify causal direction, and comparative studies contrasting short-form video with traditional social media and offline peer contexts would help isolate what is genuinely unique to the short-form video format.

12. Conclusion

Viral trends on short-form video platforms are best understood not as a novel psychological phenomenon but as a novel structural amplifier of two well-established processes: identity-driven group affiliation and classic social conformity. This paper reviews the relevant literature, proposes an original study directly comparing the strength of these two pathways, and illustrates the intended statistical approach. Pending real data collection, the proposed design offers a template for producing precise, testable evidence on which psychological lever — identity or perceived consensus — most strongly drives the viral conformity that defines contemporary short-form video culture.

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