



## Full length article

## They liked and shared: Effects of social media virality metrics on perceptions of message influence and behavioral intentions



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## ABSTRACT

The present study examined the effects of social media virality metrics on perceptions of message influence on the self and others and intentions to take preventive actions. In an online experiment, a Facebook post about the topic of health risk was shown with the variations of virality metrics including the number of likes and shares. Overall, findings demonstrated the differential effects played by these virality metrics. Results revealed that high shares increased not only perceptions of message influence on the self and others but also preventive behavioral intentions. The mediation analysis indicated that *share* had an indirect effect on behavioral intentions through the perception of message influence on the self. A significant interaction effect between *like* and *share* was also found, such that the presence of high likes increased the third-person perception only when the message had low shares. Implications of these findings are further discussed with regard to leveraging the ability of virality metrics in health promotion practices on social media.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the recent years, social media have become an important pathway for conveying and exchanging health information. With the capability to reach out to a broad audience, the use of social media facilitates dissemination of health-related content and information (Chou, Hunt, Beckjord, Moser, & Hesse, 2009). More importantly, the participatory nature of these sites promotes two-way communication between health professionals and audience members (Korda & Itani, 2013). A wide array of interactive features offered on social media serve to engage users by increasing their connectedness and fostering their direct participation in the communication process (Thackeray, Neiger, Smith, & Van Wageningen, 2012).

As the use of social media expands within health communication settings, it has become increasingly important to evaluate the degree of social media engagement. In particular, system-generated information which captures users' interactions with online content, known as "virality metrics," is typically employed as a key indicator of engagement (Neiger et al., 2012). As a representation of users' collective responses (Walther & Jang, 2012), virality metrics can provide cues about individuals' implicit attitudes toward the

content (Lee-Won, Abo, Na, & White, 2016). The "like" and "share" functions, for example, which are prominent features of Facebook, are used as a means of expressing users' agreement or approval with a posting by displaying aggregate numbers. Those system-generated metrics signal the extent of social endorsement of the social media content, which may affect users' information processing and decision-making (Alhabash, McAlister, Quilliam, Richards, & Lou, 2015).

Past research has indeed shown that virality metrics can have significant effects on perceptions of content, such as judgments of content quality and credibility (Knobloch-Westerwick, Sharma, Hansen, & Alter, 2005; Lee & Sundar, 2013; Sundar, Oeldorf-Hirsch, & Xu, 2008). However, little research thus far has examined the effects of virality metrics on perceptions of content influence. The prior literature has documented that media audiences are likely to fall into perceptual bias referred to be as the *third-person perception* (TPP; Davison, 1983), which leads to greater perceived media influence on others than on the self. On the other hand, it is important to note that the interactive online environment may affect and change how individuals form the TPP: unlike the traditional media environment where information about others' reactions is almost nonexistent, the online environment can provide greater information from which individuals can infer other audience members' attitudes (Tal-Or, Tsfati, & Gunther, 2009). Social media may especially have the potential to reshape the process

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of the TPP because this online platform increases awareness of other users' endorsements of the message in the form of virality metrics (Stavrositu & Kim, 2014).

The present study investigates the effects of social media virality metrics on perceptions of message influence and behavioral intentions. Specifically, considering the two types of virality metrics (i.e., *like*, *share*), this study examines whether and how these virality metrics will affect perceptions of message influence on the self and others and possibly change the TPP, and in turn, increase intentions to take preventive health behaviors.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The use of social media for health promotion and engagement

Social media have increasingly become a key channel for communicating health content and information. As more than 70% of U.S. adults went online to search for health information (Fox & Duggan, 2013), social media sites which promote information sharing and connections among users have emerged as a popular and powerful tool for health communication (Korda & Itani, 2013). A number of health professionals and organizations have embraced the use of social media sites and attempted to establish a strong social media presence by capitalizing on those platforms to expand the reach of their messages and build the relationships with their target audience (Gallant, Irizarry, Boone, & Kreps, 2011; Neiger, Thackeray, Burton, Thackeray, & Reese, 2013).

These social media are thought to have great potential for enhancing health promotion practices because of their capability to engage users (Heldman, Schindelar, & Weaver, 2013). Contrary to one-way distribution of information, social media engage users in two-way communication (Heldman et al., 2013), and various interactive features offered on those platforms play a key role in fostering this process of engagement (Thackeray, Neiger, Hanson, & McKenzie, 2008). The effectiveness of engagement is usually evaluated by analyzing users' interactive behaviors toward online content, known as "virality metrics" (Liu, Lu, & Wang, 2017). Virality metrics refer to computer-generated descriptive statistics displayed on a website to represent aggregated user interactions with content available online (Walther & Jang, 2012). These metrics that convey users' collective responses serve as an evaluative input reflecting the popularity and performance of the content. As the use of social media increases within health promotion settings, such virality metrics are identified by practitioners and organizations as central to the evaluations of their messages and practices (Neiger et al., 2012).

Despite the increased efforts to leverage the ability of social media to engage users and boost the message virality, little is known about the effects of social media virality metrics on persuasive outcomes. To date, most of the research concerning the topic of social media use in the health sector focuses on analyzing the social media content produced by organizations and the extent to which they harness social media tools (e.g., Abramson, Keefe, & Chou, 2015; Park, Reber, & Chon, 2016). However, relatively little research has tested whether exposure to virality metrics could affect the evaluations of health messages and encourage actions to improve health. To contribute to the literature, the current study attempts to investigate the role of virality metrics in influencing processing of health messages and behavioral intentions.

### 2.2. The influence of social media virality metrics

On social media, various metrics are employed to represent the message virality: for instance, in the context of Facebook environment, the "like" and "share" functions are widely utilized on this

platform by displaying the aggregate number of users' interactions with social media content. Research has proposed that these interactive features can serve as cues for inferring other users' implicit attitudes toward the content (Lee-Won et al., 2016; Stavrositu & Kim, 2015). The number of times the content has been liked and shared by other users can signal the degree of agreement or endorsement, and it may trigger a cognitive heuristic — "mental shortcut used as a judgement rule for making quick evaluations" (Sundar et al., 2008, p. 3455). Particularly, these cues can trigger a *bandwagon heuristic*, which refers to the judgment rule in which individuals base their perceptions and behaviors on other people's reactions (Sundar, 2008).

The heuristic-systematic model (HSM) defines such reliance on mental shortcuts as heuristic processing, and suggests that individuals tend to choose this route of heuristic processing unless they are highly motivated to process issue-relevant information (Chaiken, 1980). Furthermore, in his MAIN model, Sundar (2008) claims that this tendency to process information based on cues has increased among Internet users due to the vast amount of information in the online environments, and more specifically, interface cues that are transmitted through four types of technological affordances—modality (M), agency (A), interactivity (I), and navigability (N)—result in heuristic-based judgements. Cues that trigger bandwagon heuristics can be conveyed by the agency affordance (i.e., the ability of the technology to allow any entities, involving the self and the collective other, to act as a source of information) (Sundar et al., 2008). As other layperson users can act as a source of information and a variety of interface cues such as the number of likes and shares allow individual users to gain knowledge about how many other users actually respond to and endorse the content, these cues can stimulate the operation of bandwagon heuristics: online users are more likely to perceive the content to be credible or of high quality if that is endorsed by a large number of other users (Sundar, 2008).

Such bandwagon effect of virality metrics can also be understood from the perspective of normative social influence. Virality metrics can be thought of as cues which signal social norms (Alhabash et al., 2015). By communicating the extent to which online content is endorsed by other users, virality metrics reflect the level of approval and acceptance of a given content (Alhabash et al., 2015). In this sense, high virality metrics may evoke perceptions of *injunctive norms* pertaining to a person's beliefs about what is approved by most others (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990, p. 1015). Recognizing that many other users are liking and sharing the content, a person may develop the perception that the majority of people believe this content is important and they approve the issues or behaviors promoted in the content. Hence, it is conceivable that virality metrics, as bandwagon cues, can exert normative influence on users' content evaluations and decision-making (Go, Jung, & Wu, 2014).

Prior research has indeed demonstrated that virality metrics have significant effects on users' perceptions of content and behavioral intentions across a variety of online media contexts (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2005; Lee & Sundar, 2013; Lee-Won et al., 2016; Sundar et al., 2008). For example, Knobloch-Westerwick et al. (2005) found that popularity metrics affected individuals' selective exposure to online news, such that participants were more likely to select articles with higher explicit recommendation ratings. In the e-commerce setting, Sundar et al. (2008) found that individuals tend to perceive products as being of higher quality and are likely to have more positive attitudes toward products and greater purchase intentions when they are presented with products with bandwagon cues (e.g., higher star ratings and sales rankings). Moreover, when it comes to evaluating the health-related content on social media, such bandwagon effect occurred:

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