

Digital Humanities and Metaphor Theory: Developing New Methods for Analyzing Online Discourse

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of Digital Humanities (DH) and metaphor theory as a means of developing innovative methodologies for analyzing online discourse. As digital communication takes a central role to contemporary life, understanding the metaphors imbued within digital language and platforms is essential for interpreting how users conceptualize their experiences in online spaces. Grounded in the conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, the study argues that metaphors are not merely stylistic features but cognitive tools that shape digital thought and behavior. Relying on examples from social media, online forums, and digital interfaces, the study examines how metaphors such as “networks,” “sharing,” and “virality” encode specific ideological and cultural meanings. These metaphors influence user interactions, structure narratives of connectivity and participation, and reveal underlying power structures in digital environments. By integrating computational tools with close textual analysis, this research proposes a hybrid DH methodology that bridges qualitative interpretation with large-scale data analysis. Ultimately, the paper contends that metaphor theory offers a critical lens for uncovering the rhetorical and cognitive frameworks that govern online discourse, providing scholars with new strategies to interpret digital culture in both granular and systemic ways.

Keywords: Digital Humanities, metaphor theory, online discourse, conceptual metaphors, digital communication, cognitive linguistics.

Introduction

Digital Humanities (DH) integrates computational methods with humanistic inquiry to analyze cultural practices in the digital age. Social media platforms such as Twitter/X have become central to public discourse, offering rich data for examining how language shapes thought and social behavior. Within this context, metaphor theory, especially Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), provides a valuable lens for understanding how users conceptualize abstract experiences through figurative language.

CMT, as developed by Lakoff and Johnson, argues that metaphors are fundamental to cognition. They function by mapping abstract domains onto more concrete experiences. One such metaphor is “going viral,” which draws on the biological concept of contagion and applies it to the digital spread of content. This metaphor frames digital popularity as rapid, uncontrollable, and infectious. These qualities both celebrate and problematize virality. On platforms like Twitter/X, where engagement metrics drive visibility, the metaphor of virality becomes especially influential, shaping both user behavior and platform dynamics.

This article examines how the metaphor “going viral” functions within Twitter/X discourse. The platform’s design which is characterized by short-form content, real-time interaction, and algorithmic amplification makes it an ideal site for studying digital metaphors. Users often invoke “virality” to describe the rapid dissemination of tweets, memes, or news. However, they also use it to critique the platform’s role in manipulating visibility. The metaphor serves both as a descriptor and as a tool for critique, revealing tensions around authenticity, platform control, and user agency.

Methodologically, the study employs a hybrid approach that combines computational and qualitative tools. A curated corpus of viral tweets is analyzed using metaphor identification, sentiment analysis, and emotional classification. Network analysis maps how the metaphor spreads across different communities. This is complemented by close reading, which places metaphor use within broader discourses about platform politics, identity, and digital labor.

By focusing on “going viral,” this study shows how metaphors do not simply reflect user attitudes but actively shape digital interaction. The metaphor’s cultural significance has intensified in the post-COVID era, where contagion is both a biological and informational concern. Ultimately, this research contributes to the field of Digital Humanities by demonstrating how metaphor analysis can uncover the ideological and emotional dynamics of online discourse in specific digital contexts.

Literature Review

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT): Foundations and Relevance

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's “Metaphors we Live by” revolutionized the understanding of metaphors by positing that they are not merely linguistic embellishments but fundamental to human cognition. They argue that “metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980:3). This perspective suggests that our conceptual system is largely

metaphorical, influencing how we perceive, think, and act. Central to CMT is the idea of mapping between a source domain (concrete experience) and a target domain (abstract concept). For instance, the metaphor 'ARGUMENT IS WAR' illustrates how we conceptualize arguments in terms of war, using expressions like “defend a position” or “attack the opponent's point” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 4). Such mappings are not arbitrary but grounded in our physical and cultural experiences. CMT's emphasis on the cognitive role of metaphors provides a robust framework for analyzing online discourse. In digital communication, metaphors shape how users conceptualize and interact with technology and each other. For example, referring to content as 'going viral' maps the spread of information onto the concept of disease transmission, influencing perceptions and behaviours online.

Metaphor Theory in Digital Humanities

The Digital Humanities (DH) field integrates computational tools with humanistic inquiry, offering new methodologies for analyzing large-scale digital texts. Within DH, metaphor theory has been instrumental in unpacking the conceptual structures underlying digital communication. Wicke and Bolognesi (2020) analyzed 200,000 tweets related to COVID-19, identifying prevalent metaphors like WAR, MONSTER, STORM, and TSUNAMI. They found that 'the WAR framing is used to talk about specific topics, such as the virus treatment,' highlighting how metaphors frame public discourse on health crises. Their study demonstrates the utility of metaphor analysis in understanding collective responses to global events.

Similarly, Prabhakaran et al. (2021) conducted a large-scale study on political discourse, revealing that 'posts with metaphors elicit more engagement from their audience overall,' underscoring the persuasive power of metaphoric language in digital platforms. These studies exemplify how metaphor theory, particularly CMT, can be operationalized within DH to analyze and interpret online discourse, providing insights into the cognitive and cultural dimensions of digital communication.

The 'Going Viral' Metaphor in Online Discourse

The metaphor 'going viral' is pervasive in digital culture, describing content that rapidly spreads across platforms. This metaphor maps the concept of virality in epidemiology onto the dissemination of information, implying rapid, uncontrollable spread.

Hansen et al. (2011) explored the relationship between affect and virality on Twitter, finding that 'negative sentiment enhances virality in the news segment,' suggesting that emotionally charged content is more likely to spread. This aligns with the metaphor's connotation of infectiousness and rapid transmission.

Lehmann et al. (2012) analyzed hashtag dynamics on Twitter, concluding that 'epidemic spreading plays a minor role in hashtag popularity,' indicating that external events often drive virality more than network effects. This finding refines the 'going viral' metaphor, suggesting that although it effectively captures aspects of information spread, it may oversimplify the underlying mechanisms. These studies highlight the importance of critically examining the metaphors we use to describe digital phenomena, as they shape our understanding and engagement with online content.

Theoretical Framework

Combining CMT with digital discourse analysis offers a comprehensive framework for examining online communication. CMT provides the conceptual tools to identify and interpret metaphors, while digital discourse analysis offers methodologies for analyzing language use in digital contexts. This integrated approach allows researchers to explore how metaphors like “going viral” structure user experiences and interactions online. By analyzing linguistic patterns, user behaviours, and platform dynamics, scholars can uncover the cognitive and cultural underpinnings of digital communication. For instance, examining how users describe content as 'infectious' or 'spreading like wildfire' can reveal underlying conceptualizations of information dissemination. These insights can inform platform design, content moderation policies, and strategies for combating misinformation.

This framework is adequate in studying ‘going viral’ on Twitter. Applying this integrated framework to the study of the 'going viral' metaphor on Twitter is particularly apt, given the platform's role in facilitating rapid information spread. Twitter's retweet function, trending topics, and hashtag usage all contribute to the virality of content. By employing CMT, researchers can dissect the metaphorical language users employ to describe viral content, uncovering the conceptual mappings at play. Digital discourse analysis enables the examination of how these metaphors influence user behavior, content engagement, and information dissemination patterns.

This framework is also adaptable to various contexts, allowing for comparative studies across platforms, cultures, and events. For example, analyzing the use of the 'going viral' metaphor during health crises versus political campaigns can reveal shifts in metaphor usage and public perception.

Methodology

This study employs network analysis and sentiment and emotional analysis to explore how the metaphor 'going viral' spreads and gains meaning in digital discourse. These methodologies together provide insight into the structural and affective dimensions of metaphor use on platforms like Twitter, where language evolves rapidly through user interaction. By examining both how metaphors travel through networks and the emotional responses they provoke, we gain a clearer understanding of their influence in online environments.

Network analysis enables the visualization of how metaphors circulate among users by treating individuals as nodes and their interactions such as retweets and mentions as connections. This approach reveals how key influencers, or nodes with high centrality, play a crucial role in amplifying metaphors. It also uncovers how communities within the network may interpret and adapt metaphors differently, contributing to their semantic evolution. In the case of "going viral," network analysis shows how rapidly and widely the metaphor spreads and how its meaning shifts across different digital communities, depending on user behavior and platform dynamics.

Complementing this structural perspective, sentiment analysis evaluates the emotional tone of posts containing the metaphor. It categorizes responses as positive, negative, or neutral, offering insight into how the emotional charge of a metaphor impacts its spread. For instance, if "going viral" is associated with excitement or joy, it may encourage sharing and engagement; if linked to anxiety or frustration, it may provoke critique or rejection. Emotional analysis builds on this by identifying specific emotions such as fear, surprise, or anger that influence how metaphors resonate with audiences. This deeper emotional mapping explains why some metaphors achieve virality while others do not.

Integrating these methods allows researchers to explore not only who spreads metaphors and how, but also why they resonate. The emotional appeal of a metaphor can amplify its spread, making it more likely to be adopted across networks. Additionally, this combined approach reveals the temporal dynamics of metaphor use, how sentiment around a metaphor like "going viral" may shift from excitement to skepticism as it moves through different communities.

Ultimately, the combination of network, sentiment, and emotional analysis offers a comprehensive lens for understanding the life cycle of digital metaphors. It underscores how both connection and emotion

shape linguistic trends online. This hybrid methodology contributes to the field of Digital Humanities by providing tools to trace not just the movement of metaphors, but also the meanings and emotions they carry in shaping digital culture.

Data Analysis

Extract 1

"so hard to capitalize virality
everyone wants to go viral... but then what?
this is what virality looks like: a spike, and a drop. always.
to be useful, you need outstanding retention + WOM growth loops: 80% of the
work (or to be extremely consistent in going viral: never happens)"

The statement “so hard to capitalize virality... this is what virality looks like: a spike, and a drop. always...” critiques the transient and unstable nature of viral success in digital environments. Analyzing this statement through network analysis, sentiment analysis, and emotional analysis reveals the deeper implications of the metaphor “going viral” and its effects on online engagement and user perception.

In digital networks, virality typically follows a predictable pattern: a piece of content rapidly gains attention, then just as quickly fades into obscurity. This phenomenon is captured in the “spike and drop” metaphor. Network analysis allows us to visualize this pattern, showing how a central node such as a popular tweet or post, is amplified through rapid interactions from a wide user base. These interactions, often driven by shares, mentions, or algorithmic boosts, create the spike. However, without mechanisms like retention strategies or word-of-mouth growth loops, engagement collapses, creating the drop. The quote points to this fragility, suggesting that the real challenge lies not in achieving virality but in sustaining meaningful interactions afterward.

The sentiment within the quote is ambivalent. On the one hand, there is an aspirational tone: “everyone wants to go viral.” On the other, it quickly shifts to skepticism with the rhetorical question, “but then what?” This transition signals a deeper frustration with the superficial allure of virality. The statement concludes with a stark realism, “never happens” expressing a sense of cynicism about the feasibility of consistent viral success. This blend of initial hope and eventual resignation is common in digital spaces where creators chase visibility but struggle with long-term impact.

Emotionally, the statement evokes a mix of excitement, anxiety, and disillusionment. The initial desire for virality reflects the excitement and promise of recognition. Yet, the quick fade of attention triggers anxiety, especially when creators realize that virality rarely translates into lasting value. The phrase “never happens” underscores a broader disillusionment, a recognition that despite the thrill of going viral, it often fails to yield sustained engagement, community growth, or professional success. This emotional shift from hope to skepticism mirrors the emotional trajectory of many users navigating digital fame.

Using network analysis, we gain insight into how content spreads and collapses within social platforms. Sentiment analysis highlights the ambivalence users feel toward virality, revealing tensions between aspiration and disillusionment. Emotional analysis adds depth by tracing the psychological responses, excitement, fear, and frustration that accompany viral success. Together, these methodologies reveal that virality is not merely a technical or social media metric, but a deeply affective and precarious phenomenon.

Ultimately, the metaphor of “going viral” encapsulates both the promise and pitfalls of digital culture. While virality offers the possibility of rapid attention, it seldom provides the foundation for long-term growth. The analysis of this quote demonstrates that true digital impact relies not on fleeting visibility but on consistent engagement, meaningful retention, and authentic audience relationships. In this way, virality serves less as a goal and more as a fleeting phase in the broader pursuit of lasting digital relevance.

Extract 2

"Going viral on CT with a few shitposts and engagement farming is very easy, but building sustained interest is the real challenge. Focus on your community and product. Virality might bring you four big moments, but they mean nothing without substance to back them up. Artists in the space seem to understand this the best. They're the ones building real communities that actually scale overtime, unaffected by floor prices, chains, platforms being used or even market volatility. We need more of this energy in the space, which is why I'm so bullish on creators. Invest in creators, they were the driving force behind onboarding the masses in 2021, and they'll be the ones to do it again in 2025."

The statement reflects on the metaphor of “going viral” by contrasting superficial online tactics with the deeper value of building a digital community. The phrase “going viral with a few shitposts and engagement farming is very easy” critiques the simplicity and short-term nature of achieving virality through shallow content. This initial spike in visibility often occurs via engagement loops, likes, retweets, and comments that boost algorithmic reach but lacks long-term sustainability.

The critique shifts toward a more constructive tone by emphasizing the value of investing in creators who build authentic communities. These communities, unlike transient viral audiences, are based on real engagement, loyalty, and shared values. The comparison between short-term virality and long-term community-building underscores a key insight: viral moments are fleeting, but sustained digital presence requires meaningful relationships within a network.

Sentiment in the statement is mixed. There's clear disdain for the ease of viral success through low-effort content, but also optimism about the future of digital spaces centered around creators. The encouragement to “invest in creators” reflects a belief in sustainable, community-driven growth as opposed to opportunistic bursts of fame.

Emotionally, the text moves from frustration to hope. The early critique evokes dissatisfaction with the triviality of viral tactics. However, the later message encourages creators to focus on authenticity and connection. This progression reveals a deeper understanding of how emotional investment, rather than algorithmic manipulation, forms the foundation of lasting digital influence.

By examining the metaphor of virality through these lenses, the analysis reveals how online culture is evolving. While short-term tactics may still generate buzz, meaningful success increasingly depends on long-term community engagement. In this light, “going viral” becomes not an end in itself, but a potential step in a broader journey toward building real digital value.

Extract 3:

"How to become a 100k/month dropshipper as fast as possible? Step 1: Don't dropship. All my brands are going stupid viral on TikTok shop, And they all follow the same secret product launch strategy that guarantees virality within 1 week...RT + comment "SHOP" for a step-by-step doc. (must be following)"

This text presents a viral marketing strategy that uses the metaphor of “going viral” to promote dropshipping success. It promises rapid visibility via TikTok Shop, encouraging users to engage by commenting “SHOP” and retweeting, a clear attempt at triggering a viral loop.

Virality in this context is manufactured through engagement farming. The post leverages the TikTok algorithm, which boosts content based on interaction volume. By asking users to comment and share, the

creator exploits network structures that reward high activity, increasing the chances of widespread reach. The network design is participatory, using collective engagement to amplify visibility.

The sentiment throughout is overwhelmingly positive and motivational. Phrases like “stupid viral” and “guarantees virality” evoke excitement and urgency. The mention of a “secret product launch strategy” suggests exclusivity and expertise, creating intrigue. However, critical readers may detect an undertone of oversimplification, potentially triggering skepticism about how sustainable or replicable the promised success actually is.

Emotionally, the post taps into desire, ambition, and fear of missing out. The urgent call-to-action plays on users’ insecurities and aspirations for quick success. While the primary emotional appeal is enthusiasm, a more reflective response might involve doubt or frustration, especially from audiences familiar with the realities of digital marketing.

The metaphor of “going viral” is used to signify instant success and recognition. It is framed as something that can be engineered, not just something that happens by chance. This commodifies virality, reducing it to a formula that anyone can follow, while glossing over the unpredictability and effort often involved in achieving lasting success online.

Overall, the text uses virality both as a marketing tactic and rhetorical device, promoting a vision of fast success while obscuring the more complex nature of online visibility and brand growth.

Extract 4

"Mum: He's about to go viral any day now
Woman: You started an Instagram for him?
Mom: I didn't vaccinate him"

This exchange satirizes the concept of virality by linking it to a controversial topic, vaccination by using humor to highlight the absurdity of online fame culture. Through a blend of analytical frameworks such as network, sentiment, emotional, and metaphor analysis, the dialogue critiques how digital virality often thrives on provocation rather than substance.

From a network analysis perspective, virality is understood as the rapid dissemination of content across digital platforms. In this instance, the joke reveals that viral content frequently gains traction not due to its value or insight but because it taps into controversy. The humorous misunderstanding assuming that a child is going viral because of an Instagram account, clashes with the ironic punchline, “I didn’t vaccinate him,” drawing attention to how polarizing content can become a trigger for viral sharing. This underscores the tendency of online networks to amplify emotionally charged or culturally divisive topics, regardless of their truth or ethical standing.

The sentiment behind the exchange is overtly sarcastic, aiming to critique the way viral fame is often engineered through shock rather than authenticity. The mother’s statement does not promote anti-vaccination views; rather, it lampoons how controversial stances are exploited to gain social media attention. This reveals a negative sentiment toward a culture that celebrates engagement over integrity. The use of sarcasm and irony draws attention to the commodification of digital attention, where even dangerous ideas are rewarded if they produce traffic.

Emotionally, the text evokes a mix of cynicism and frustration. It highlights the detachment many feel toward a social media landscape where the outrageous often overshadows the meaningful. While the exchange is humorous on the surface, it carries a deeper emotional weight, reflecting disillusionment with a system that values shock value more than substance or responsibility.

The metaphor of “going viral” is redefined in this context. Rather than representing the natural spread of creative or impactful content, virality becomes a marker of digital spectacle—something achieved through deliberate provocation. The joke subtly critiques this transformation, suggesting that in today’s media climate, even harmful decisions can be leveraged for popularity.

In sum, the exchange uses humor and irony to critique the nature of digital virality, revealing how online fame is often built on controversy rather than value. It invites a deeper reflection on the consequences of a culture that equates attention with success.

Extract 5

STOP trying to go viral!
Virality is intriguing, but it shouldn't be the sole goal.
Going viral overnight doesn't guarantee substance.
Consider this: you create something humorous, it goes viral,

but is it aligned with your objectives? When we discuss virality, it means reaching your audience effectively and creating a meaningful impact. Take Coca Cola, for instance. They target a specific audience. For them, virality translates into becoming an industry leader. Achieving recognition through a successful study, now that's genuine virality. So, if you define it that way, count me in
 #viral #substance #virality #goingviral #views #likes #insta #instagram #explore #ad #new #genuine #real #fame #famous

The concept of “going viral” has become a defining metaphor in digital culture, symbolizing sudden, widespread visibility. However, the analyzed text critiques the pursuit of virality as a goal in itself, arguing instead for substance, strategic intent, and long-term impact. By applying network analysis, sentiment analysis, and emotional analysis, we can better understand how this metaphor functions and the implications it holds for social media discourse.

From a network analysis perspective, the critique draws a contrast between random virality and strategic virality. Quick virality often achieved through emotionally charged content can spread widely through social networks but tends to be short-lived. The post’s statement that “going viral overnight doesn’t guarantee substance” emphasizes the superficiality of such attention spikes. In contrast, the example of Coca-Cola illustrates a model of strategic virality where messages are deliberately crafted to resonate with a specific audience. Coca-Cola’s brand recognition stems not from randomness but from targeted content that aligns with long-term objectives. This comparison underscores that networked visibility is most impactful when driven by intentional engagement rather than fleeting popularity.

In terms of sentiment analysis, the text conveys a balanced emotional tone. It critiques the obsession with viral fame, labeling it as potentially “empty” or misaligned with personal or brand values. Negative sentiment is evident in the caution against chasing views and likes without meaningful outcomes. However, positive sentiment emerges in the advocacy for purpose-driven content. The text promotes a constructive redefinition of virality, suggesting that when used with intention, virality can serve as a powerful tool for influence, credibility, and leadership. Thus, the sentiment shifts from disillusionment with short-term success to optimism about sustainable growth.

Emotionally, the analysis reveals underlying frustration with the ephemeral nature of viral fame. There is a sense of disillusionment directed at content creators who prioritize attention over value. The call to “stop

trying to go viral” expresses a yearning for authenticity and depth in digital interactions. Yet, there is also a motivational appeal embedded in the suggestion that aligning content with broader goals like building community or establishing brand leadership, This can yield long-term rewards. The use of Coca-Cola as an example evokes inspiration, suggesting that virality is not inherently shallow but becomes meaningful when backed by substance.

The metaphor of “going viral” is central to this critique. It is framed as a process that mimics contagion, rapid, uncontrollable, and often directionless. However, the post redefines this metaphor by arguing that virality can be engineered for strategic impact. The tension between randomness and control, and between fame and purpose, is at the heart of this analysis. Rather than rejecting the idea of virality outright, the text invites a deeper interrogation of what it should mean and how it can be harnessed ethically and effectively.

In sum, this analysis demonstrates that virality, as a metaphor and social media phenomenon, is multifaceted. Through the lenses of network dynamics, sentiment trends, and emotional resonance, we see that while viral fame may offer visibility, it is purposeful engagement that leads to meaningful and lasting impact.

Discussion of findings

The analysis of various samples and their use of the metaphor "going viral" reveals significant insights into how virality is conceptualized and critiqued in digital discourse. While often viewed as a measure of success, virality carries complex implications that shift depending on its context. A key finding is that virality functions as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it signals widespread attention and engagement, but on the other, it is increasingly regarded with skepticism. Several samples reveal disillusionment with virality's fleeting nature, highlighting how temporary attention lacks depth or lasting value. Statements like “virality shouldn’t be the goal” suggest a growing awareness that sustainable impact relies more on substance than momentary fame.

At the same time, some examples present virality as a strategic tool rather than a random occurrence. For brands like Coca-Cola, virality is integrated into long-term marketing strategies aimed at audience alignment and brand recognition. This perspective shifts virality from being about sudden exposure to being part of a broader effort to cultivate meaningful connections and long-term engagement. Here,

virality becomes purposeful rather than accidental, emphasizing its potential when paired with authenticity and strategic intent.

The discussion also uncovers a broader critique of digital culture's focus on trendiness over substance. Samples critiquing shock-driven content or "engagement farming" reflect dissatisfaction with viral content that prioritizes controversy over quality. This aligns with a shift in audience expectations: content that lacks authenticity may achieve short-term success but fails to foster loyalty or community. Emotional responses further reveal a tension between the excitement of virality and the frustration with its artificiality. While some users express cynicism about the pursuit of virality, others still associate it with hope—especially when linked to genuine impact.

Another key finding is the role of community and authenticity in sustaining virality. Creators who build real relationships with their audiences, rather than seeking immediate attention, tend to maintain longer-term success. This trend reflects a maturation of digital culture where users value content that resonates deeply and personally. Virality, in this sense, is not just about amplification but about relevance and connection.

Network analysis reinforces this by illustrating how viral content spreads through digital ecosystems. Engagement metrics like shares and comments help content circulate, but these do not necessarily equate to sustained attention. Without substance and strategy, content may fade as quickly as it spreads. Overall, the findings suggest a shifting perspective: virality is no longer the end goal, but a means—most effective when used deliberately to support authenticity, connection, and long-term value.

Implications for the Study

The implications for this study on the metaphor "going viral" in digital discourse, particularly through the lens of Digital Humanities, network analysis, and sentiment analysis, are significant for understanding how digital content functions within the current landscape of social media and online communication. The findings reveal the dual nature of virality. Virality as a tool for recognition and engagement and as a transient phenomenon that, when exploited without substance, can lose its effectiveness. The implications for the study is stated as follows:

1. **Rethinking Virality:** One of the major implications of this study is that virality should not be viewed as a singular event or a goal in itself but rather as a dynamic and strategic process embedded in a broader context of content creation, distribution, and engagement. From the analysis, it shows that virality in the digital age is not merely about spikes in views or shares; it must be contextualized with long-term goals such as audience engagement, brand recognition, and community building. This discovery enriches our understanding of the shifting nature of virality and how it interacts with underlying social, cultural, and ideological factors that shape online communication.

2. **The Intricacies of Digital Metaphors:** The metaphor of "going viral" represents a clear view of complex digital processes, such as network propagation and emotional engagement. By focusing on metaphor theory and conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), the study expost how digital metaphors mould and limit our understanding of social media dynamics. The use of metaphors in online discourse serves as a cognitive framework that simplifies the complexity of digital phenomena, which is particularly important when analyzing how terms like "viral" influence user behavior, perceptions, and social interactions. This study enhances our comprehension of the role language and metaphors play in shaping not only individual experiences but also collective social narratives within digital spaces.

3. **Power Dynamics in Digital Discourse:** The analysis further highlights how power dynamics in digital communication are framed by metaphors of "connection" and "sharing." The use of virality as a metric of success fosters a culture where attention is commodified, reinforcing existing power structures. Virality is leveraged by social media platforms and influential digital creators to shape public discourse, promoting the spread of ideologies and norms. Understanding the implications of virality as a metaphor provides insights into the rhetorical power embedded in online communication, as it influences not only how people engage with content but also what content is considered valuable and worthy of attention.

4. **Cognitive and Emotional Impact:** The study highlights the emotional and cognitive implications of virality in digital environments. Sentiment and emotional analysis establish how viral content can elicit strong reactions, from excitement to disillusionment. The pursuit of virality is often emotionally charged, motivated by a desire for recognition, acceptance, and validation. These emotional dynamics manipulate the behaviours of online users and can have enduring impact on individual and group identities within digital spaces. Recognizing the emotional investment in viral content can help researchers understand the motivations behind online engagement and how emotionally-driven discourse shapes digital culture.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study recommends that further research expand metaphor analysis in digital discourse. For this study, we looked at “going viral.” Other metaphors, such as “networks,” “sharing,” and “feedback loops,” should be investigated, as they play a significant role in framing how we conceptualize digital engagement. Applying conceptual metaphor theory to a wider array of metaphors tends to enrich our understanding of digital culture and provide deeper insights into how language shapes our digital experiences. Also, integrating longitudinal studies in virality research is recommended. Noting that virality is often perceived as a short-term spike, a deeper exploration of longitudinal and sustained engagement is important for future studies. Researchers should examine how viral content impacts long-term brand loyalty, community growth, and platform evolution. This would also involve tracking the lasting effects of viral moments on individuals and communities, exploring how such events contribute to the identity-building processes that occur in digital spaces. Lastly, the study recommends that researchers should incorporate interdisciplinary methods. The integration of computational tools with qualitative methods offers a powerful approach to understanding online discourse. Researchers should continue to use tools like sentiment analysis and network analysis while integrating more traditional humanistic approaches (e.g., content analysis, ethnographic studies) to provide a more comprehensive view of how digital metaphors shape online communication. Combining these methods create a clearer understanding of virality and its implications for digital culture.

Conclusion

The metaphor “going viral” offers a revealing lens through which to understand digital communication. This study, grounded in Digital Humanities and metaphor theory, applies network analysis, sentiment analysis, and emotional analysis to explore how “going viral” shapes online discourse. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), particularly the work of Lakoff and Johnson, the metaphor is viewed not just as a figure of speech but as a cognitive and cultural framework that structures user behavior and expectations in digital environments.

Virality, often perceived as a marker of success, typically manifests as a sudden spike in visibility, followed by a rapid decline. The metaphor suggests an uncontrollable, disease-like spread, yet the reality is more structured and strategic. Network analysis reveals that virality often depends on interconnected users,

influencers, and algorithmic amplification. However, without retention strategies or sustained community engagement, viral content usually fails to produce lasting impact.

Sentiment and emotional analyses further expose the mixed feelings associated with virality. While the initial rise may spark excitement and hope, this often gives way to frustration and disillusionment. Many creators express skepticism about the long-term value of viral moments, highlighting instead the importance of building communities and fostering word-of-mouth engagement.

This research underscores that virality is not an end in itself. Tweets and posts analyzed show that creators who focus on authenticity, consistency, and audience relationships are better positioned for sustained relevance. The metaphor “going viral,” while vivid, can mislead creators into chasing ephemeral success rather than cultivating meaningful, long-term engagement. Ultimately, understanding digital metaphors like “going viral” enables a deeper grasp of how language and technology intersect. By employing interdisciplinary tools from Digital Humanities, this study shows that metaphor theory is essential for interpreting how digital culture functions and evolves.

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