

**A BEHAVIOUR-LED FRAMEWORK OF PARTICIPATORY TREND DIFFUSION  
IN THE SHORT-FORM DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT: INSTAGRAM INDIA (2025)  
EVIDENCE****Tanay Saxena**Postgraduate Student, Xavier Institute of Communication,  
St. Xavier's College, Mumbai**ABSTRACT**

This study presents a behavior-led conceptualization of participatory trend diffusion in short-form digital environments. The research is based on qualitative observation, reflexive journaling, and exploratory semi-structured interviews to examine highly visible Instagram trends in India in 2025. Drawing upon consumer behavior scholarship and diffusion theory, the study identifies behavioral antecedents of amplification—emotional clarity, participation ease, and cultural adaptability—that influence diffusion pathways in algorithmically mediated ecosystems. A seven-stage participatory diffusion framework is proposed, and analytically derived propositions are offered for future empirical validation. The contribution lies in outlining behavioral preconditions of amplification and organizing them into a reproducible marketing construct grounded in qualitative synthesis.

**INTRODUCTION**

Digital platforms have transformed consumption practices, cultural circulation, and marketing diffusion processes. Instagram Reels represents a highly participatory short-form digital environment in which trends scale rapidly through user imitation and algorithmic amplification. This paper examines highly visible trends within the Indian Instagram ecosystem in 2025. India represents one of the largest and fastest-growing digital consumption markets globally, characterized by mobile-first behavior, linguistic plurality, and strong participatory cultures. This context enables the study of accelerated participatory diffusion processes that may be less observable in slower-scaling markets. Classical diffusion of innovations theory conceptualizes adoption as occurring across adopter categories through communication channels over time (Rogers, 2003). Structural virality research further demonstrates how network clustering shapes diffusion patterns (Goel et al., 2016). However, these perspectives insufficiently explain the behavioral and affective conditions that trigger amplification within short-form, algorithmically mediated environments. Short-form digital ecosystems differ from traditional diffusion contexts because participation is not limited to adoption. Users reproduce, reinterpret, and co-create trends. Diffusion therefore becomes recursive rather than linear, shaped by continuous interaction between behavioral participation and platform affordances. Rather than asking why content becomes viral, this study investigates how behavioral participation interacts with algorithmic systems to generate clustering and amplification. The contribution lies in identifying behavioral antecedents of amplification—emotional clarity, participation ease, and cultural adaptability—and organizing them into a behavior-led framework of participatory diffusion.

**1. THEORETICAL POSITIONING****1.1 DIFFUSION IN PARTICIPATORY ENVIRONMENTS**

Diffusion theory focuses on the adoption of innovation over time (Rogers, 2003). Users do not solely adopt in digital participatory contexts, but they reproduce, re-read, and co-produce trends. Diffusion is not necessarily linear but recursive.

Research on structural virality suggests that diffusion patterns are influenced by network clustering (Goel et al., 2016). However, it is not just structural explanations that explain the existence of clustering as a result of certain trends. This paper fills this gap by preempting behavioral participation and affective immediacy as predicates of amplification. Together, these perspectives suggest that diffusion outcomes are jointly shaped by network structure, cognitive processing, and affective activation, yet the behavioral bridge between these mechanisms remains underdeveloped.

**1.2 EMOTIONAL CLARITY AND BEHAVIOURAL PARTICIPATION**

Consumer behavior research suggests that contextually constructed meaning (Belk, 1988) and affective reactions frequently precede deliberate cognitive evaluation (Kahneman, 2011). Studies on viral diffusion further demonstrate that sharing behavior is strongly influenced by emotional activation (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

This paper conceptualizes emotional clarity as the immediate recognizability of a dominant affective cue within content. Emotional clarity differs from emotional intensity; while intensity concerns magnitude of arousal, clarity concerns interpretive precision. Emotionally clear content reduces ambiguity, facilitates rapid cognitive categorization, and increases the likelihood of participatory replication in short-form digital environments.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and interpretive design aimed at analytical theory development rather than statistical generalisation. The objective was to identify recurring behavioural dimensions underlying participatory diffusion in short-form digital environments.

Three qualitative inputs were integrated:

- Naturalistic observation of Instagram Reels
- Reflexive journaling
- Semi-structured exploratory interviews

### 2.2 DATA COLLECTION

Observations were conducted over an eight-week period in early 2025 during which selected trends demonstrated sustained visibility within the Indian Instagram ecosystem.

Three trend categories were purposively selected:

- Ghibli-inspired visual filter aesthetic
- Kunafa chocolate sensory replication trend
- POV-based narrative format trend

Five semi-structured interviews were conducted, including two active content creators and three frequent Instagram users who had participated in at least one observed trend. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on active engagement in trend participation.

Interviews lasted between 30–45 minutes and were conducted in conversational format. Discussions were recorded with consent and transcribed for thematic analysis. These interviews were exploratory and not intended to be statistically representative.

### 2.3 REFLEXIVE POSITIONING

A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the observation period. Entries documented first impressions, emerging doubts, and potential interpretive biases. Iterative review enabled differentiation between subjective aesthetic appreciation and recurring behavioural patterns.

### 2.4 ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

Thematic analysis was conducted through iterative coding of observational notes and interview transcripts. Open coding identified recurring behavioural dimensions, including emotional signalling, replication effort, clustering behaviour, and cultural adaptation. Axial categorisation was then used to synthesise these dimensions into a staged participatory diffusion framework.

Framework development emerged inductively through cross-case synthesis rather than reliance on pre-existing lifecycle assumptions.

## 3. CASE ANALYSIS

### 3.1 GHIBLI-INSPIRED VISUAL FILTER TREND

The Ghibli aesthetic draws from soft, nostalgic animation traditions characterised by emotional subtlety. On Instagram, high-intensity digital content was juxtaposed with this aesthetic.

It was observed that there were low barriers to participation and high levels of visual coherence. Users frequently associated the trend with emotional comfort and aesthetic tranquility, reinforcing the relevance of emotional clarity.

### 3.2 KUNAFA CHOCOLATE SENSORY TREND

Food replication centred on sensory texture and hedonic appeal. The conversation with creators revealed the significance of the moment of visual break in creating replay value.

Cultural localisation sustained visibility beyond initial novelty.

### 3.3 POV NARRATIVE FORMAT TREND

POV forms eliminate psychological distance through the appearance of first person perspective. The structural familiarity led to contextual flexibility among themes, which allowed replication.

### 3.4 CROSS-CASE SYNTHESIS

Across cases, four recurring structural dimensions were identified:

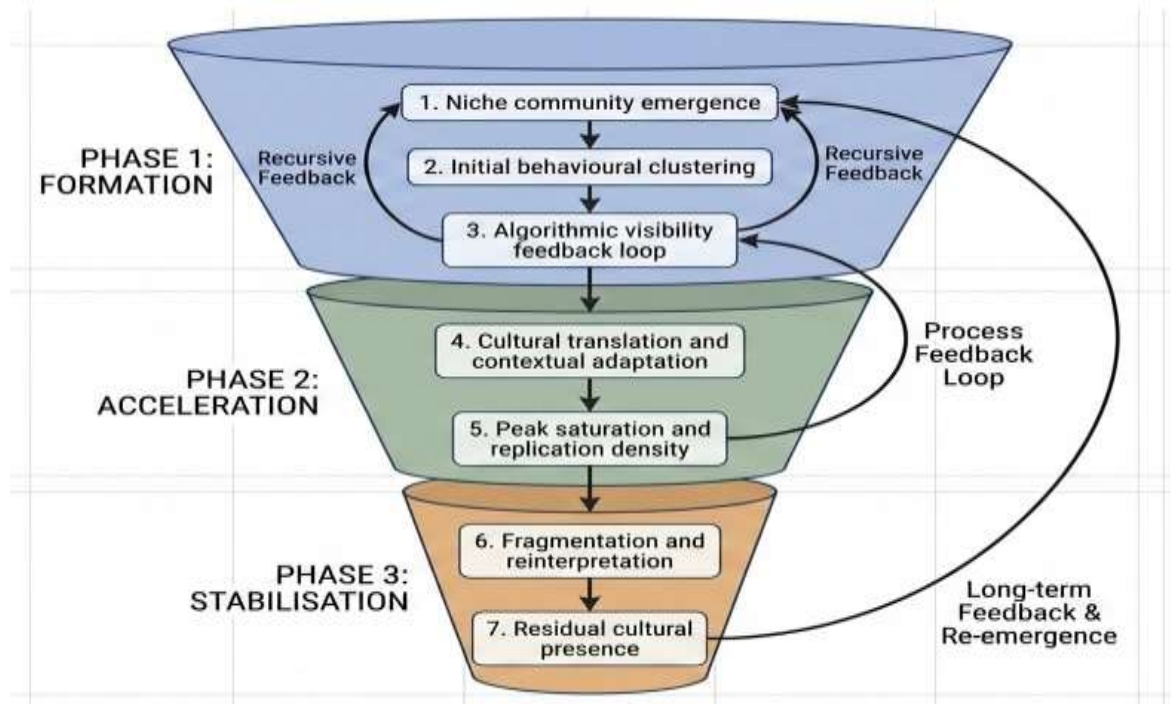
- Emotional clarity preceded visible behavioural clustering.

- Low interpretive complexity was necessary in participation.
- Replication was legitimised by early niche communities.
- Cultural adaptability influenced the duration of the trend lifecycle.

The following framework was informed by these dimensions.

#### 4. SEVEN-STAGE PROCESS FRAMEWORK OF PARTICIPATORY DIFFUSION

The framework conceptualises participatory diffusion as a recursive, feedback-driven process structured across three phases.



#### FORMATION PHASE

- Niche community emergence
- Initial behavioural clustering
- Algorithmic visibility feedback loop

#### ACCELERATION PHASE

- Cultural translation and contextual adaptation
- Peak saturation and replication density

#### STABILISATION PHASE

- Fragmentation and reinterpretation
- Residual cultural presence

Diffusion within participatory digital ecosystems is non-linear and reinforced by reciprocal interaction between behavioural clustering and algorithmic amplification.

#### 5. BEHAVIOUR-LED PROPOSITIONS TO BE EXAMINED IN FUTURE RESEARCH

Proposition 1: Trends exhibiting high emotional clarity during early participation may increase the likelihood of behavioural clustering.

Proposition 2: Algorithmic amplification and behavioural clustering demonstrate a reciprocal relationship in participatory short-form environments.

Proposition 3: Lower replication barriers may accelerate diffusion speed.

Proposition 4: Cultural adaptability may extend trend visibility beyond the peak amplification phase.

These propositions are analytically generalisable but not statistically generalisable.

#### 6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The results indicate that the digital marketing approach in participatory settings may be improved by focusing on the notion of behavioural resonance rather than immediate amplification. Early clustering may be facilitated by emotional acuity. Participation may be speeded up by ease of replication. Lifecycle visibility can be maintained by cultural adaptability. Following the activities of micro-creators can also indicate a developing momentum. These implications complement rather than replace algorithmic optimisation strategies.

### 7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is qualitative, context-specific, and focused on Instagram India in 2025. While analytically applicable to similar participatory environments, the framework is not intended as a universal model.

The interpretive nature of the analysis may introduce researcher subjectivity despite reflexive controls. Future research may empirically test the propositions through longitudinal, quantitative, or cross-platform comparative designs.

### 8. CONCLUSION

This study advances a behaviour-led framework of participatory trend diffusion in short-form digital environments. By identifying behavioural antecedents of amplification—emotional clarity, participation ease, and cultural adaptability—the paper advances conceptual understanding within digital marketing and consumer behaviour scholarship.

The proposed framework offers analytical generalisability and provides a structured foundation for future empirical testing across platforms and contexts.

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