


RESEARCH ARTICLE	 Brand Integration and Its Influence on Audience Engagement and Shareability of Video Content: An Empirical Study among Indian Youth
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Abstract Do audiences experience discomfort when viewing branded content online, or do brand integrations enhance a video's identity and appeal? What drives individuals to share such content on their social media timelines? This study investigates these questions through an empirical survey conducted among Indian youth. Findings reveal that users are more likely to share videos that evoke positive emotions or personal resonance. However, overt brand placement—particularly when presented prominently or early in the video—can dampen engagement and reduce sharing intentions. Subtle branding, especially when shown at the end of a video, tends to have a neutral or negligible impact on audience behaviour. Additionally, participants reported a tendency to selectively share branded content via platforms like WhatsApp or Facebook, which allow greater control over audience segmentation. This research contributes to a growing body of literature on branded entertainment and digital engagement by contextualizing global insights within the Indian digital landscape.	
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Introduction

As of June 2019, India had 665.31 million internet subscriptions, amounting to nearly 50% of its population [1]. Of these users, approximately 325 million consumed digital video content, with digital media contributing 23% to the country's advertising expenditure (Adex).

The surge in data usage for streaming online video content highlights the growing importance of video as a critical touchpoint for brands. However, the rise of ad-blockers and a general aversion to disruptive advertising has forced brands to reevaluate their strategies. In this context, branded entertainment has emerged as a compelling alternative, reaching large audiences and fostering emotional connections [2]. In this study, branded entertainment refers to "brand-generated entertainment content into which a branded message or product is integrated" [3].

The exponential growth of social media platforms has simplified the sharing of content. Users now share millions of images, videos, and GIFs daily—95 million photos and videos on Instagram, and over 500 million GIFs on Twitter, for example. On Snapchat, videos constitute 57% of shared content [5]. Moreover, videos generate the highest engagement rates on platforms like Facebook and Instagram [6].

Given viewers' general aversion to traditional advertising, it is crucial to examine whether subtle brand integration—such as product placement—impacts user engagement and sharing behavior without interrupting storytelling.

As branded content becomes more ubiquitous, user engagement is often assessed using metrics like likes, comments, and shares. This study investigates the influence of brand integration on these metrics, with a particular focus on the shareability of video content.

Literature Review

Numerous studies affirm the efficacy of branded content in enhancing brand awareness and purchase intent [8]. This impact is particularly pronounced among Gen Z and millennial audiences. According to the Advertising Research Foundation (ARF), engagement with branded content among these demographics was 31% higher than traditional YouTube pre-roll advertisements [9]. The non-intrusive nature of branded content likely contributes to its effectiveness [10].

Branded Content Efficacy

Effective branded content is typically characterized by its seamless integration into storytelling, minimizing viewer disruption [11, 12]. When the brand message complements the narrative and provides value, it is more likely to be well-received [13].

The Persuasion Knowledge Model explains that when audiences recognize a brand's intention to persuade, they activate cognitive defenses against the content [14]. However, if branding is subtle and integrated, these defenses may not be triggered. One study found that pre-disclosure of brand sponsorship led to reduced visual attention and lower sharing intention, whereas post-disclosure did not have the same negative effects [15]. Consequently, overt branding may hinder engagement, while subtle integration fosters positive outcomes [16].

Emotional resonance also plays a critical role in branded content effectiveness. Content that aligns with a brand's values and evokes positive emotions can strengthen the consumer-brand relationship [17].

AOL's study on branded content revealed key insights [18]:

- Branded content enhances brand affinity and recall.
- The perceived quality of content is more influential than the extent of brand integration.
- Continuous data tracking is essential for campaign optimization.

Soft metrics like engagement and retention are increasingly prioritized. On platforms like Instagram, metrics such as impressions and forward taps offer insights into content performance [19].

Shares as a Measure of Engagement

Digital engagement is commonly measured through likes, comments, and shares [20]. These actions reflect cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement with branded content [21, 22]. Among these, the number of shares is considered a particularly robust indicator of content impact [23].

Enjoyment is a major driver of video sharing. When viewers derive pleasure from content, they are more inclined to share it, thereby transmitting positive brand associations. Importantly, the threshold for sharing is lower than for making a purchase decision [24, 25].

A study identified four primary motivations for sharing content:

- **Social Currency:** Enhancing self-image by appearing knowledgeable or trendy.
- **Emotions:** Content that evokes strong emotions, such as excitement or anger.
- **Usefulness:** Informative or incentive-based content, though less influential among younger users.
- **Storytelling:** Narratives that resonate, particularly in beauty and lifestyle categories.

Effective content sharing results in earned media, broadening reach and potentially increasing website traffic and sales—especially vital for e-commerce brands. Understanding platform preferences for sharing is thus essential.

Platform Preferences for Sharing

While traditional theories like media richness and social influence offer some insights, they fall short in explaining behaviors on modern digital platforms.

Social media platforms are not just for passive consumption; users actively share content based on its perceived value and social context. However, due to the mixed nature of social networks (e.g., friends, family, colleagues), users often face social pressure and choose to restrict or filter their audience.

Studies show that users are less inclined to share commercial content publicly due to concerns about judgment. Instead, they prefer private channels like messaging apps, which offer greater control over the audience. As such, WhatsApp and similar platforms have become popular mediums for sharing branded video content.

Research Design

This exploratory study investigates whether brand integration influences video likability and sharing intention. The following research questions were formulated:

1. Is there a correlation between liking content and sharing it?
2. Is there a significant difference in sharing intention for branded vs. non-branded videos?
3. Do consumers exhibit platform-specific preferences for sharing content (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp)?

Hypotheses:

- **H1:** There is no correlation between liking a video and the intention to share it.
- **H2:** There is no significant difference in sharing intention for branded versus non-branded videos.
- **H3:** There is no significant difference in platform preference for sharing liked video content.

3. Research Methodology

An exploratory research design was employed to examine user engagement with branded and non-branded video content on social media platforms. Data were gathered through a structured, online questionnaire-based survey comprising three sections.

The first section focused on demographic characteristics and social media usage behavior of the respondents. The second section implemented a projective technique wherein participants were shown two versions of the same video advertisement: one with brand attribution (logo and tagline displayed at the end) and one without. Both versions were otherwise identical to control for variations in storytelling, tone, and visual appeal. After viewing each version, respondents were asked to indicate whether they liked the video, whether they would share it on social media, and which platform they would prefer for sharing.

The third section included open-ended questions to gain deeper qualitative insights into participants' reasoning, especially in cases where they refrained from sharing the branded version. This part aimed to explore whether the act of brand placement at the end influenced their engagement and sharing behavior, even when the brand did not actively participate in the storytelling.

The final dataset comprised responses from 101 individuals aged between 16 and 34 years, selected through random sampling from multiple Tier I and Tier II cities across India. The sample included 51 females and 49 males; 55 respondents were aged between 16 and 25, and 46 between 26 and 34 years. All participants were regular users of platforms such as Facebook and Instagram for video consumption, ensuring a representative spread across age and gender categories.

4. Data Analysis Tools

Two statistical methods were employed to test the research hypotheses. Pearson’s correlation coefficient was used to assess the relationship between respondents’ liking of a video and their intention to share it. A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with replication was conducted to determine whether there was a significant difference in sharing intentions between branded and non-branded versions of the video.

5. Results and Analysis

5.1 Video Preference and Sharing Intention

Out of the 101 respondents, 90 indicated that they liked the video. Among those who did not express a liking for the video, five were aged between 16–25 and six were between 26–34 years, demonstrating a relatively even distribution across age groups. Gender-wise, 7.5% of female respondents (4 out of 53) and 14.6% of male respondents (7 out of 48) did not favor the video. When the brand name was omitted from the final frame, 89.1% of respondents liked the video, indicating a positive response to the unbranded version.

5.2 Sharing Behavior: Branded vs. Non-Branded Video

A comparison of the two video versions revealed a slight decline in sharing intention for the branded version. While 67 respondents indicated willingness to share the unbranded video, only 64 stated the same for the branded version.

Table 1. Summary of Sharing Intention Across Video Versions

Sharing Intention	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Will share at least one version	74
Will share the unbranded version	67
Will share the branded version	64
Will share both versions	57
Will not share any version	27
Will share branded but not unbranded	7
Will share unbranded but not branded	10

Of those who liked the video (n=90), 70% indicated they would share at least one version. Notably, 10 individuals who were initially willing to share the unbranded version refrained from sharing the branded one. Conversely, seven respondents expressed a preference for the branded version, citing that the inclusion of a brand lent purpose or context to the narrative. Interestingly, two respondents who did not like the video nevertheless showed intent to share the branded version, reasoning that it might appeal to others in their network.

5.3 Statistical Testing of Hypotheses

To test H_{01} : *There is no correlation between liking the video and the intention to share it*, Pearson’s correlation coefficient was calculated.

- $r^2 = 0.45$, indicating a moderate to strong positive correlation.
- The null hypothesis was rejected, suggesting that greater liking of a video increases the likelihood of sharing it.

For H_{02} : *There is no significant difference between sharing intention for branded and non-branded versions*, a two-way ANOVA with replication was conducted. The results are shown below:

Table 2. Results of Two-Way ANOVA (Sharing Intention: Branded vs. Non-Branded Video)

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Rows	37.54	100	0.375	4.440	5.06×10^{-13}	1.391
Columns	0.045	1	0.045	0.527	0.470	3.936
Total	46.04	201				

Since the **P-value** > **0.05** and the **F-value** < **F critical**, the null hypothesis was accepted. This indicates that the presence of a brand name at the end of a video does not result in a statistically significant difference in sharing intention.

6. Platform Preference for Sharing

The distribution of preferred social media platforms revealed that **WhatsApp** was the most widely used platform (n=96), followed by **Instagram** (n=83) and **Facebook** (n=68).

Table 3. Preferred Social Media Platforms by Age Group

Age Group (n)	Facebook	Instagram	WhatsApp
16-25 (54)	37	53	53
26-34 (47)	31	30	43

Among respondents aged 30 and above, **100%** reported frequent WhatsApp use, whereas Instagram and Facebook usage dropped significantly. Interestingly, **Snapchat** was only used by individuals aged 18-25, suggesting a generational divide in platform preference.

Regarding **platforms for sharing** the videos, **WhatsApp** remained the dominant choice for both versions:

- **68.7%** of those who liked the unbranded video preferred to share it via WhatsApp.
- For the branded version, **44 respondents** selected WhatsApp, and **32 chose Facebook**.

The preference for WhatsApp appears to stem from its private and direct communication model, allowing users to selectively share content with individuals they believe would appreciate it. Its widespread use further reinforces its status as the primary channel for content dissemination.

7. Discussion of Results and Implications

This study aimed to investigate the sharing behavior of digitally active users in Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities in India, particularly in response to branded and non-branded video content. The three proposed hypotheses were empirically tested, revealing several key behavioral patterns.

The findings affirm that users exercise discernment in what they choose to share on social media, favoring content that conveys a personal touch when interacting with peers. The first hypothesis, which examined the relationship between liking a video and the intention to share it, was supported by a statistically significant positive correlation. This outcome underscores that emotional resonance and viewer enjoyment are pivotal drivers of content dissemination. Respondents' qualitative feedback reinforced this finding. For instance, Kriti (21) remarked, *"I like the content of the video, so I would share it even if it has the brand's name in the end,"* while Nitin (31) stated, *"I liked the simplicity of the video. I would always like to contribute/convey a valuable message to society which brings happiness and ease in our living lifestyles."* Such statements illustrate that emotional engagement and narrative storytelling are central motivators for sharing, aligning with existing literature on digital media virality.

The second hypothesis addressed whether the presence of a brand at the end of the video significantly influenced sharing intent. The results of the two-way ANOVA confirmed that there was no statistically significant difference in the sharing behavior between branded and non-branded versions. This was supported by participant testimonials such as Sumit (27), who stated, *"Brand or no brand will not make much of a difference. If I feel it's outstanding, I will share it."* Others, such as Antara (34), expressed a positive inclination toward brand presence, explaining, *"It shows that a brand is telling a story and narrating. Not merely selling a product. You remember the brand better in this way."* These observations suggest that meaningful brand integration—particularly when it complements the narrative—can enhance, rather than hinder, shareability and emotional response.

However, some participants reacted negatively to overt branding, indicating that it disrupted the emotional arc of the video. Ria (29) reflected, *"Without the brand, it felt like a sweet short film. But with the brand, it became an ad with a hidden motive."* Similarly, Vidya (21) noted, *"The brand's name at the end dissolves the emotional experience built up during the video."* One particularly strong response came from Vishnu (28), who stated, *"I'll feel like I'm an unpaid advertisement carrier for the brand."* These responses imply that for certain users, late-stage branding may lead to perceived inauthenticity, thereby diminishing the emotional value of the content.

The third hypothesis explored platform preference for sharing branded content. WhatsApp emerged as the most preferred platform, followed by Facebook. This aligns with prior international studies suggesting that users often choose more private or semi-private communication channels, such as messaging applications, when sharing commercial content. The rationale is that users seek to maintain control over their recipient lists and avoid broadcasting potentially promotional content broadly. This behavior emphasizes the need for marketers to consider platform-specific dynamics when designing distribution strategies for branded content.

8. Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital content sharing by contextualizing branded video marketing within the Indian digital ecosystem. The findings suggest that emotional storytelling, subtle brand integration, and platform-specific sharing behavior significantly influence content virality among Indian youth.

For marketing practitioners, several practical implications emerge. First, a compelling narrative that evokes strong positive emotions remains essential for increasing the likelihood of content being shared. Second, contrary to traditional assumptions, subtle branding—especially when introduced toward the end of the video—does not negatively impact shareability and may, in fact, enhance brand recall if well-integrated with the storyline. Third, marketers should prioritize platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook that offer greater recipient control, as these are preferred by audiences for sharing emotionally resonant or promotional content.

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The research design did not account for user engagement outside the digital environment, which may also influence online behavior. Furthermore, prior exposure to similar

content on platforms not included in this study could have affected participants' perceptions. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias. More sophisticated methodologies—such as facial coding or eye-tracking technologies—could offer deeper insights into real-time psychological and emotional responses to different genres of content and branding strategies.

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- **Conflict of Interest**

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- **Ethical Approval:** Not applicable.

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