

The Tipping Point Summary

By Malcolm Gladwell

The music starts to play; perhaps a few people start tapping their feet and bobbing their heads. There may be a bit of shifting in seats. The energy is beginning to build. Eventually, one person, or perhaps a couple, gets up to dance. And with that, the dancefloor is open, and people flock towards it. Soon it's a heaving mass of people pulsating away to the music.

The Tipping Point is an insight into what creates viral phenomena, and how ideas gain momentum. By analyzing epidemics, Gladwell examines what it takes for something to reach critical mass.

If we go back to the dancefloor analogy, have you ever noticed how often toddlers or young children inspire others to join the dance party? Young kids have very little inhibition, and so when the music starts to play, they can't help themselves. Their enthusiasm and charm are often enough to inspire others to join in. Malcolm Gladwell asserts that a unique group of people can spread messages and influence others to jump on the bandwagon. He also explains that we can manipulate messages to be "stickier," and that context is crucial.

Malcolm Gladwell is a bestselling author who provides a fascinating and unique approach to the social sciences. His engaging style and rigorous research give the reader a fresh perspective on the nuances of being human.

We'll briefly look at *The Tipping Point*, which is a poignant analysis of how

things spread and reach critical mass. We'll also see how drawing on epidemiology for inspiration, explains how viruses can teach us about human nature.

Getting Infected

Amid the global coronavirus pandemic, we've probably become a lot more aware of how viruses spread. However, writing in 2000, Gladwell was inspired by his journalistic coverage of the AIDS epidemic. Gladwell's approach was to adopt a different way of looking at the world, by applying an interdisciplinary approach to looking at the phenomena of viral trends. In fact, the book's title comes from the point where the curve on the virus graph escalates exponentially, indicating the mass spread of the disease. Most of us have "flatten the curve" etched into our brains thanks to Covid-19, which is our bid to stop the severity of the tipping point.

But what are the characteristics of an epidemic?

The first thing is that they start with individuals. Viruses are highly contagious and can easily be spread between people.

You may be familiar with the story of the rice and the chessboard? It's a familiar story that describes exponential doubling. The story goes that a conman approaches a king with a chessboard, and instead of payment, he asks for rice. However, there's a caveat. The conman wants the king to place one grain of rice on the first square of the chessboard. He asks for the rice to be doubled on the second square, so two grains of rice. On the third square, he asks for the amount of rice on the second square to be doubled, so four grains. As the king moves to each square, he doubles

the amount of rice on the previous square. By the time the king reaches the 41st square, he owes over a trillion grains of rice. The amount of rice owed at the final square of the chessboard amounts to about 460 billion tonnes.

If we apply this logic to how diseases spread, you can see how easy it is for a virus to reach the stage where it's classified as an epidemic.

Secondly, viruses are clever, and they can make small changes to protect themselves. Viruses mutate to help them survive. If we look at the influenza virus, each year it brings with it a new strain. Likewise, Covid-19 is a new form of coronavirus.

Thirdly, viruses aren't something that build with momentum. They're scary because of their ability to go from relatively lowkey, to full-blown epidemic. And, once the so-called tipping point is reached, things escalate very quickly.

So how do we apply this knowledge of viruses and the tipping point to social epidemics?

From Ordinary to Extraordinary

Victor Hugo famously said, 'There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come.' But, how do some ideas, messages, objects, products, and so forth become viral? Malcolm Gladwell proposes three factors that result in a social epidemic. They're "The Law of the Few," "The Stickiness Factor," and "The Power of Context."

The Power of the Right One

Have you ever noticed that there are certain people who draw a crowd? Perhaps it's because they're charismatic, maybe they're popular, or maybe they're just a fountain of knowledge. Disseminating a message or an idea happens through people talking about it, and spreading it. However, there's a caveat, for it to achieve critical mass status, the right type of people have to spread it.

There are three types of exceptional influencers. These people have the ability to get mass buy-in because they're socially connected, very persuasive, or highly knowledgeable. Gladwell defines them as Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen.

You'll be familiar with Connectors. They're those people who, when they enter a room, everyone knows who they are. At an event, they talk to everyone and circulate the room oozing charm. Connectors are social butterflies, and they're very good at making contact with people and maintaining these connections. While most people they include in their lives may be so-called "weak ties," the power of The Connector is to accumulate acquaintances and maintain some form of contact with them. The Connector also embodies a range of different and varied social circles, so they're able to occupy a range of different sectors. Hence, when it comes to spreading an idea or message, their diverse networks are invaluable.

Research into connections shows that we're a lot more connected than we often like to think. Yuval Harari discusses this in *Sapiens*, but even a novel experiment illustrates just how easily a message can spread. The

famous Six Degrees of Separation study, conducted in the 1960s, showed the extent of human networks. One hundred and sixty people in Nebraska were given a letter to give to a New York stockbroker. The idea was that they had to pass the letter on to someone who would get them a step closer to the letter reaching its final destination. Most letters reached the stockbroker in five to six steps. Another iteration of this, is the game "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon." The aim of the game is to connect a celebrity to Kevin Bacon in as few steps as possible. For example, Kevin Bacon and Gwyneth Paltrow. Kevin Bacon starred in *Sleepers* with Brad Pitt, and Brad Pitt starred alongside Paltrow in *Seven*. Therefore Kevin Bacon can be linked to Gwyneth Paltrow in two steps. The game works so well using Kevin Bacon, because he has appeared in so many films, and he works across a range of genres.

Mavens are the people we turn to when we're told to "ask an expert." We all have a specific person we turn to when looking for book recommendations, music recommendations, or advice about what laptop to buy. Perhaps you're a Maven in your own circles? Mavens are knowledgeable and trustworthy, and we call on them when we need advice that's backed with scholarly research. Mavens are helpful and love sharing their knowledge with other people. And, the best thing about a recommendation from a Maven, is that it isn't just hype and hyperbole; it's weighty and well-considered.

Salesmen are the people we're all familiar with. They have the gift of the gab and persuade us to buy into things. They recruit followers by being convincing and assertive. They're confident, enthusiastic, and utterly charming. However, Salesmen aren't just the people in stores trying to sell us things. Salespeople often make us buy into things because they show us how great it is. If we go back to the example of the first person to begin dancing, that person is a salesperson. They show us what we're

missing out on, and what we could be enjoying if we just got involved. Salesmen also use their bodies and body language to communicate with us in subtle ways. They may nod along with us, maintain eye contact, or mimic us in subtle ways in a bid to draw us in. Salespeople have mastered the art of playing to our emotions so that we jump on the bandwagon.

Sometimes you may need the trifecta of the Connector, the Maven, and the Salesmen to get your idea to explode. At other times you may just need the weight of a good Salesmen to achieve critical mass.

If you asked anyone at the beginning of the 90s whether Hush Puppies were cool, you'd probably be met with, 'Sure, they're cool if you're a Grandpa.' In the early 90s, Hush Puppies sold about 30 thousand pairs a year. However, things changed dramatically when a group of youngsters started wearing them ironically in New York. Fashion Mavens likely identified this trend. These Mavens probably spread this trend, and then Connectors and Salesmen jumped on board, and the next thing Hush Puppies went mainstream. So what went from being a very untrendy brand, Hush Puppies achieved critical mass.

Getting Sticky With It

Malcolm Gladwell's concept of stickiness is one of the critical insights of the book, and it inspired Chip and Dan Heath to write *Made to Stick*. Stickiness explains why some ideas have staying power, and others don't. In short, what makes things stick?

For something to catch on, it needs to be "sticky" and memorable. Have you ever wondered why nostalgia is so powerful? Nostalgia is powerful

because it's based on the best memories and stories. How often have you bought into something because you were fueled by the power of childhood memories?

Stickiness is often all about how something is packaged, whether it's a product or an idea. How we present something has a massive influence on how much buy-in we create. The most important thing about any presentation is knowing who your audience is. Once you know your audience, you can tailor a message that's perfect for them.

Gladwell uses the example of *Sesame Street* and how it used the power of stickiness to encourage literacy amongst children. While many of us have been led to believe that children are passive viewers of television, children look at screens when they're engaged and interested. When the show is uninteresting or hard to follow, they lose interest. The creators of *Sesame Street* rigorously researched how children viewed the show. To begin with, psychologists said the creators should keep the human characters and muppets separate in order to protect the barrier between fantasy and reality. They posited that children wouldn't be able to distinguish between what's real and what's not when the lines were so blurred. However, children much preferred the interactions between muppets and humans, and learned a lot more. The creators also knew that presenting educational elements on the screen, such as numbers and letters, and using repetition meant that children retained a lot more information. In short, the content of *Sesame Street* became very sticky when it was presented to the right audience, in the right way.

Context Is Everything

We're often told that we're a product of our environment. The fact is that the world around us greatly influences our behavior.

Being in a quiet park is very different from being in a busy shopping mall. Likewise, viewing art in an art gallery is very different from viewing it at a school. The environment and social context we find ourselves in, have a massive impact on how we act. Hence, if we change the context, we can drastically change how a message or idea is received.

Gladwell uses the "Broken Windows" theory as an example of this. The theory posits that visible signs of crime such as graffiti, broken windows, and litter encourage further incidents of crime. By cleaning up the streets, the idea is that people will be less encouraged to commit crimes. The theory has since been debunked, but nonetheless, it still adds insight into behavior. For example, if you walk into a pristinely clean house, you're a lot more likely to try and keep it tidy. Likewise, if you're in a shopping center with shopping carts scattered around the place, instead of wheeling it back to the trolley bay, you're probably more likely just to abandon your trolley.

Social context is another primary driver of behavior. We behave differently depending on who we're around. Think about how you behave around strangers, close friends, work colleagues, and family? Perhaps you moderate your language; maybe you fall into using slang; maybe you share in-jokes? Irving Goffman famously called this behavior impression management, and he also said we navigate the territory between frontstage and backstage behavior, depending on who we're around.

A superb example of this is the Stanford Prison Experiment. The controversial experiment has been used in literature as a significant case

study on research ethics, and was turned into a very compelling film in 2015. The experiment shows, as Christof from *The Truman Show* says, 'We accept the reality of the world with which we're presented.' A group of college boys who became participants in the experiment was divided into prison guards or prisoners, and the researchers created a simulation prison for them. After just six days of the two-week experiment, it had to be called off because the guards acted so maliciously towards the prisoners. The participants accepted their roles and behaved in ways that they never thought possible. In fact, playing the part of "prison guard" was enough to destabilize their natural dispositions and completely alter how they'd usually behave.

Bigger Isn't Always Better

We're social creatures, and we naturally fall into a range of groups. Groups tend to be homophilous, so it's relatively easy to spread ideas among group members. This can be seen in the case of book clubs. Most book clubs are tailored for a particular type of woman who enjoys a specific genre of literature. Hence, if a book is popular among book club members, it just takes one book club member to recommend it to an acquaintance in another book club. This is what happened with the *Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. On a larger scale, you can see the impact of a book Maven such as Oprah and the wide-reaching influence of Oprah's Book Club.

However, there's a limit to group efficacy. The Rule of 150 argues that 150 is the biggest a group should get before it starts to splinter or for factions to creep in. When groups are smaller, you can also capitalize on what's called transactive memory. You might be sitting around a dinner table and say something like, 'Where was that restaurant that we used to go to on holiday each year? The place where they had that amazing

homemade ice cream?' It's likely someone will jump in and remind you and fill in the gaps. Groups tend to have a collective memory, and this is often very powerful because individuals often can't store enough information in their brains.

In Conclusion

An idea spreads when innovators take hold of it. They're the brave individuals who take a risk and decide that their idea is worth sharing with the world. Then the early adopters get involved. They're usually opinion leaders and are valued for their expertise and knowledge. They blaze the trail for the masses. Once the masses climb on board, the true extent of the trend can be seen. The masses are what make something go from alternative or counter-culture to mainstream. Finally, the trend drops off when the Laggards come on board. They're the very late adopters, and they're usually the death knell to something being cool.

In a world where we're becoming increasingly connected, and where social media influencers are cropping up like daisies, this is a captivating and astute account of understanding human behavior. Furthermore, it's a fascinating look into why certain things become trends, and how to encourage buy-in (especially for important issues).

The Tipping Point adds a perceptive insight into the contemporary world, where memes and trends are part of the currency of everyday life. And learning at what stage the tipping point is reached, tells us about the world around us, and those who live in it.