

VIRAL MARKETING: PERCEPTION AMONG THE YOUTH- A STUDY AMONG COLLEGE GOING STUDENTS OF KOLKATA

Kallol Saha^{1*} & Pranam Dhar²

¹Department of Commerce, Barrackpore Rastraguru Surendranath College, West Bengal, India.

²Post Graduate Department of Commerce & Management, West Bengal State University, India.

*Corresponding Author's E-mail: kallolsaha14@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The present world of marketing is characterized by several attributes including global cut-throat competition. To combat the threats of this overgrowing competition, marketers are resorting to multi-channel advertising and promotional measures. One such relatively new and extensively used method of promotion is Viral Marketing. Viral marketing is the diffusion of product or service related information over the internet at an exponential speed through e-mails, social networking sites, company websites, mobile messages, blogs, tweets etc. The term 'viral' is used to denote the high speed at which the message spreads. This concept is also popularly called electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) marketing. Here, even the people unrelated with the original source may take active part in spreading the message without having any direct benefit or advantage from such message spreading activity. The authors, in this paper have tried to throw light on the factors which influence Viral Marketing and have also tried to study the perception of the Youth about Viral marketing campaigns and the effect of Viral marketing on Consumer Purchasing decisions.

Keywords: *Viral Marketing, e-WOM, Message Credibility*

INTRODUCTION

The present business world is characterized by several factors like high degree of cut-throat competition, entry of new competitors, open economy, IT enabled buying-selling methods etc. All these have prompted businessmen and marketers to take help of newer and advanced methods of marketing, advertising, promoting and making their products popular. One such popular and highly used method used by marketers for product and service promotion/ marketing is Viral Marketing.

As per Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus, the term 'Viral' in relation to internet parlance, refers to 'something that quickly becomes popular or well known by being published on the internet or sent from person to person by e-mail, phone etc.'

On the other hand, Kotler *et al.*, (2005) define marketing management as the art and science of choosing target markets and building profitable relationships with them. This involves obtaining, retaining and developing customers through creating and delivering and communicating superior customer value.

Combining the above concepts of the terms 'viral' &

'marketing' we may define viral marketing to be a process in which a marketing message, generally initiated by a company spreads at an exponential rate through e-mails, company websites, blogs, tweets etc. Here, the term 'viral' is used to denote the high speed at which the message spreads. In case of Viral Marketing, even the people unrelated with the original source may take active part in spreading the message without having any direct benefit or advantage from such message spreading activity.

Since the last few years, the increased use of internet and internet-based services like Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat etc. has created greater scope of spreading marketing message to the world at large. Ho & Dempsey (2010) found that online word of mouth has become more popular with the increased use of social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace & Twitter. Nigam (2012) opined that the social media and the social networking sites nowadays play a vital role in the marketing strategy of companies. The companies which select social media as an important part of their marketing strategy have greater chances of influencing consumers. In fact, whenever people are using the internet, they are automatically exposed to hundreds & thousands of marketing communications which ultimately turn out to be Viral marketing messages. Though people of all age groups are now using internet-

based services, it has been pointed out by Shavitt, Lowrey & Haefner (1998) viewed in their study that young consumers are more comfortable in looking at advertisements. So, in this study we have tried to throw light on the perception of the Youth about Viral marketing campaigns and the effect of Viral marketing on Consumer Purchasing decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review includes a study about the concept of viral marketing, its evolution and growth, advantages & motives, types or ways, & factors affecting viral marketing:

Rayport (1996) opined that viral marketing is so called because it spreads like virus among the hosts and just like a virus it is not identifiable at the beginning. He says, “when it comes to getting a message out with little time, minimal budgets, and maximum effect, nothing on earth beats a virus”.

Hennig *et al.*, (2004) opined that Word-of-mouth refers to any positive or negative remarks made by a customer regarding experiences about a product or company, which reaches to a large mass of people and organizations using the internet. In this study, the researchers have said that there are 11 motives that contribute to getting engaged in e-WOM. These are “concern for other consumers, desire to help the company, social benefits received, exertion of power over companies, post purchase advice seeking, self-enhancement, economic rewards, convenience in seeking redress, hope that the platform operator will serve as a moderator, expression of positive emotions, and venting of negative feelings.”

Phelps *et al.*, (2004) opined that Viral Marketing is synonymous to electronic Word-of-Mouth Marketing. We may call it e-WOM. In this study, it has been identified that messages which carry and invoke strong emotions such as humor, fear, sadness or inspiration, are more likely to be shared and forwarded.

Goldsmith & Harowitz (2006) opined that in case of viral marketing, product or service related interactions are conducted through e-mails, messages, online communications, social networking sites, chat rooms, hate sites, news groups, etc.

Leskovec & Jure (2007) said that Viral Marketing can be considered as diffusion of product related information and its adoption over the internet.

According to Palka, Pousttchi & Wiedemann (2009), “The term Viral describes a type of marketing that infects customers with an advertising message which passes from one customer to the next like a rampant flu virus.”

Kaplan & Haenlein (2011) viewed that Viral Marketing is one kind of electronic Word-of-Mouth communication in which the internet and the social media is used to transmit a message about the company, its brand or product at an exponential speed.

Zernigah & Sohail (2012) have found in their research based in Pakistan that there is a positive relation between informativeness, entertainment and source credibility of the message on consumer attitude towards viral marketing, and they also found that irritation did not have any effect on Consumer attitude towards Viral Marketing.

From the study of Sonawane & Chaudhari (2015) it was found that though e-mails were the original catalysts, in the present day, mobile applications, social networking sites, online communities, chat rooms extend the facility of exponentially fast rate of transfer of Viral marketing information.

Research Gap Identified

After a minute study of the literatures surveyed, it was found that there is dearth of empirical work on the related field, specifically among the youth in Kolkata and Kolkata-based study area. Therefore, undertaken the present research work.

Objectives of the Study

Based on the Literature Review, the objectives of this research are:

- To understand the concept of viral marketing clearly and to find out the impact of viral marketing in modern day situations.
- To find out how Viral Marketing has become a popular choice of marketing.
- To find out how Viral marketing works.
- To find out empirically, how the consumers react to Viral Marketing and their response towards viral marketing campaigns through some empirical study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Source of Data

Data that has been collected from first-hand experience is called primary data. Primary data has not been published therefore it is more reliable authentic and objective. Primary data has not been altered or changed thus it has greater validity than secondary data. The primary data are collected from the target group of College going students in Kolkata using a structured questionnaire. The secondary data were also collected

from books, magazine, journals, websites etc.

Type of Sampling

The respondents, who are students of colleges in Kolkata, are selected using convenience sampling.

Construction of Questionnaire

To know about the people's perception on viral marketing we have prepared a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisting both open and close ended questions was designed based on knowledge acquired through Literature Review. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of Information regarding Demographic Profile of the respondents and the second part consisted of Information about Research Specific aspects. The details of the questionnaire are as follows: (a) Type: Close-ended questionnaire (b) No. of Questions: **16(i)** Single Choice questions: **8(ii)** Multiple Choice Questions: **8**.

Respondents: The respondents to this questionnaire include mainly college going students who are most likely to use social media in their day-to-day life.

(i) No. of respondents: **50**

(ii) Age group of the respondents: **18 years-27 years**

Response Rate

Out of the 50 persons questioned there are 50 responses, so it is a complete success. This rate is also high considering the ration of 100% answers.

Response Error

There are no un-answered questions or answered wrong questions. When they had doubts regarding some questions I was (we were) there to answer.

Data Analysis and Representation

The data analysis of the answers to the questionnaire has been done on the Spreadsheet software **MICROSOFT EXCEL 2010** and **SPSS 21**. The data has been represented in the most lucid and attractive way possible with the use of Bar Graphs and Pie Charts so that the viewer can have a clear idea about the results of the research.

Use of Statistical Tools

For the first part of the analysis, Statistical tools like cumulative frequency distribution table and descriptive statistics have been used and the mean has been calculated in some cases. But, for the research-specific pin-pointed questions, exploratory factor analysis has been used with the help of SPSS 21.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

(A) Factors Influencing Viral Marketing: What Makes People Share the Viral Message?

Several factors contribute to making a message viral. To make a Viral Marketing campaign successful, it is necessary that people believe the message and share it further. Primarily, to ensure that people see a message and share it, the message should have an entertainment factor. Palka, Pouttchi & Wiedemann (2009) opined that Viral Advertisements that have characteristics of entertainment, surprise and joy attract more customers towards them. Saadeghvaziri & Hosseini (2011) opined that to capture the attention of customers, viral marketing advertisements must be concise and the entertainment factor in the advertisements adds to the customer loyalty and positive customer attitude. Secondly, people will be interested to share a viral marketing message only if they feel that the message is believable. Mackenzie & Lutz (1989) opined that Credibility of advertising is a vital factor which has influence on attitude toward the advertising. They have defined Advertising credibility as “consumers' perception of the truthfulness and believability of advertising in general”. Sharma & Kaur (2016) found in their study that the factor “perceived credibility of message sender” is most vital in determining the consumers' attitude towards viral marketing. Thirdly, people share a message when they find it informative. Muzaffar & Kamran (2011) opined that in relation to viral marketing, there is a positive relation between informativeness and consumers attitude. So, the quality and the degree of information in a viral message really determine the effectiveness of the Viral Marketing. Fourthly, sometimes people get interested in sharing a viral message when benefit or incentive is linked with sharing the message. Saadeghvaziri & Hosseini (2011) have found out that monetary benefit involved in mobile advertising has a direct influence on consumer attitude towards mobile advertising.

(B) Detailed Primary Data Analysis

General Data Analysis

Q1. Do you have Internet Access?

Table 1: Do you have Internet Access?

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	50	100
No	0	0
Total	50	100

Out of 50 persons in the population, all 50 have internet access, therefore full 100% of the sample size has access to the internet. This shows the popularity and power of the internet in modern time.

Q2. Do you have Accounts in any Social Network?

Table 2: Do you have Accounts in any Social Network?

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	50	100
No	0	0
Total	50	100

Out of 50 persons in the population, 50 of them have Accounts in any of the social network, therefore full 100% of the sample size has accounts in any of the social network. This shows the popularity and power of the social networks in modern times. Thus, all those who have access to the internet have accounts in social network. Thus, the social network plays a vital role in the lives of people.

Q3. How many hours a day do you spend on social networks?

Table 3: How many hours a day do you spend on social networks?

Categories	Hours	Percentage
None	2	4
Less than 1 hour	19	38
1-2 hours	17	34
2-3 hours	8	16
3-4 hours	4	8
Total	50	100
Weighted Average	1.38	

Out of 50 persons only 2 of them do not spend any time on social networks in a given day

- 19 of them spend less than 1 hour on social network everyday
- 17 of them spend 1-2 hours on social network everyday
- 8 persons spend 2-3 hours on social network everyday
- 4 persons spend 3-4 hours on social network everyday
- The average person spends about 1.38 hours which comes to about 83 minutes on the internet everyday which is quite a lot

- The above results indicate that on an average person spends 80-90 minutes on the internet, specifically on social networks thus there is no doubt why Viral Marketing is so popular these days.

Q4. From the following social networks, of which are you a member?

Table 4: From the following social networks, of which are you a member?

Social Networks	Members	Total	Percentage
Facebook	48	50	96
Twitter	13	50	26
Instagram	18	50	36
Google Plus	23	50	46
LinkedIn	4	50	8

Out of the five social networks Facebook has the highest membership of about 96%, followed by Google Plus with 46%, which throws a light on the popularity of android smartphones, next comes Instagram with 36%, followed by twitter with 26% and LinkedIn with only 8% membership.

Q5. How will you give ranks to Social Networks?

Table 5: Rank of Social Networks; Rank 1 is most preferred, rank 5 is least preferred

Ranks	1	2	3	4	5	Total Points	Average Points	Preference Rate
Social Networks								
Facebook	48	0	0	1	1	2430	48.60	97
Twitter	0	20	16	12	2	1540	30.80	62
Instagram	0	16	17	14	3	1460	29.20	58
Google Plus	0	11	14	20	5	1310	26.20	52
LinkedIn	2	3	3	3	39	760	15.20	30
Total	50	50	50	50	50			

Key of Analysis	
Rank 1	50 Points
Rank 2	40 Points
Rank 3	30 Points
Rank 4	20 Points
Rank 5	10 Points

When it comes to preference Facebook leads with 97% preference rate, followed by Twitter with 62% and Instagram with 58% then there is Google Plus with 52% and Instagram with only 30%. Thus, Facebook provides the best (most preferred and widely used) service.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

First, the supposition test of sphericity was conducted by the Bartlett test (Ho: All correlation coefficients are

not quite far from zero) is rejected on a level of statistical significance $p < 0.0005$ for Approx. Chi-Square = 550.574. (shown in Table 6).

Table 6: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.761
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	550.574
	Df	55
	Sig.	0.000

We have also conducted the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity. To define if the subscales were suitable for factor analysis, two statistical tests were used. The first is the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, in which it is examined if the subscales of the scale are inter-independent, and the latter is the criterion KMO (Kaiser-Meyer Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy, KMO) (Kaiser, 1974), which examines sample sufficiency. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy results in 0.809 i.e. greater than 0.05 which was supported by the Bartlett's test of sphericity with 5671 degrees of freedom. The adequacy indicator of the sample KMO = 0.761 (shown in table 6) indicated that the sample data are suitable for the undergoing of factor analysis. The control of sphericity (Bartlett's sig < 0.001)

proved that the principal component analysis has a sense. Through this analysis, data grouping was based on the inter-correlation with the aim of imprinting those factors which describe completely and with clarity the participants' attitudes towards the research subject. Consequently, the coefficients are not all zero, so that the second acceptance of factor analysis is satisfied. As a result, both acceptances for the conduct of factor analysis are satisfied and we can proceed to it.

Then a Principal components analysis with Varimax Rotation produces the dimension of differentiation was used to confirm or not the scale constructs validity. The main method of extracting factors is the analysis on main components with right-angled rotation of varimax type (Right-angled Rotation of Maximum Fluctuation), so that the variance between variable loads be maximized, on a specific factor, having as a result little loads become less, and big loads become bigger, and finally, those with in between values are minimized (Hair *et al.*, 2005). The following factors were found from the factor analysis.

For factor analysis, the author has used Principal Component Analysis consisting of 11 variables and Varimax Rotation Method and finally they were extracted into 3 factors which explain near about 58% of the total variance (Shown in Table 7, 8 and 9).

Table 7: Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	5.741	52.193	52.193	5.741	52.193	52.193	3.971	36.100	36.100
2	2.219	20.174	72.367	2.219	20.174	72.367	2.722	24.742	60.841
3	1.103	10.031	82.398	1.103	10.031	82.398	2.371	21.556	82.398
4	0.844	7.676	90.074						
5	0.366	3.329	93.404						
6	0.241	2.194	95.597						
7	0.181	1.650	97.247						
8	0.127	1.158	98.405						
9	0.082	0.749	99.154						
10	0.053	0.484	99.638						
11	0.040	0.362	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Table 8: Rotated Component Matrix

Rotated Component Matrix(a)	Component		
	Online Positive and Negative Criticism	Role of Internet	Awareness of Internet
(x1) I am aware of internet advertisements	0.117756	-0.04684	0.780774
(x2) I have participated in online contests to win products for free	0.898484	0.11028	0.154573
(x3) I watch review videos of products before buying them	0.821994	0.466592	-0.07676
(x4) I Feel Online Advertising Affects Me More Than Offline Forms of Advertising	-0.68114	-0.46343	0.171107
(x5) I have Actually Purchased a product or service after hearing about It in the Internet	0.01283	0.931629	0.092074
(x6) Through the Internet I Learn More About Brand, Products and Services Data Analysis and Representation	-0.57144	-0.43915	0.495029
(x7) I am more affected by negative comments about products as compared to positive comments	0.85728	-0.06955	0.277732
(x8) I Trust Word of Mouth Communication on the Internet	-0.07255	-0.02748	-0.90996
(x9) It is important for me to hear about the experiences of others before buying a product/service	0.454043	0.822986	-0.2058
(x10) It makes me feel good to be able spread messages about products/services to my friends on the internet	-0.52714	-0.48254	0.623255
(x11) The internet helps to strengthen my belief and commitment towards a brand of product/service	0.677693	0.546096	-0.33622
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.			
A	Rotation converged in 8 iterations.		

Table 9: Component Transformation Matrix

Component	1	2	3
1	0.756	0.587	-0.289
2	0.440	-0.129	0.889
3	-0.485	0.799	0.356

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

The above exploratory factor analysis gives us a clear picture about the three important factors:

The first factor includes the variables like – I have participated in online contests to win products for free (x2) (with loading 0.898), I watched review videos of products before buying them (x3) (with loading 0.821), I am more affected by negative comments about products as compared to positive comments (x7) (with loading 0.857) and the internet helps to

strengthen my belief and commitment towards a brand of product/service (x11). So, it may be termed as 'Online Positive and Negative Criticism'.

The second factor includes the variables like – I have actually purchased a product or service after hearing about it in the Internet (x5) (with loading 0.931), it is important for me to hear about the experiences of others before buying a product/service (x9) (with loading 0.823) and the internet helps to strengthen my belief and commitment towards a brand of product/service (x11) (with loading 0.546). So, it may be termed as 'Role of Internet'.

The third factor includes the variables like – I am aware of internet advertisements (x1) (with loading 0.781) and it makes me feel good to be able spread messages about products/services to my friends on the internet (x10) (with loading 0.623). So, it may be termed as 'Awareness of Internet'.

Variables x4, x6 and x8 was found redundant with

minimal factor loading.

So, it may be concluded that Consumers' Perception of Viral Marketing is influenced by three factors – Online Positive and Negative Criticism, Role of Internet and Awareness of Internet.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is an outcome of extensive research and hard work, but still there are many areas which could have been all the better. Thus, some of the limitations of the project are as follows:

1. Time factor

First and foremost, the factor which the author considered the main limitation of the project is the Time factor. The author started this project in the month of September and ended it by February. Thus, he only had five months to complete this project plus conduct the research. He believed that it would have done a more extensive research if he got more time.

2. Sample Size

In this short time period he was able to conduct the research based on the opinions of only 50 respondents, which is too small and might not represent the majority. He believed if he had more time then he could have considered taking the opinions of 50 more respondents. Thus, he could have done the research on 100 respondents. Thus, the data analysis would have been different, and the results also might have been different.

3. Lack of available and/or reliable data

Since Viral Marketing is a very new concept there are some areas where the data and information are limited. For instance, due to the lack of qualitative and quantitative secondary data he had to work with primary data which is really time consuming as it involves field work. Moreover, Viral Marketing is practiced mostly by new companies. These new companies are mostly private companies, thus there is a lack of access to their Balance Sheets and Profit and Loss Accounts. We must rely on the data published by these companies whether they are genuine.

CONCLUSION

After conducting this research, we conclude that Viral Marketing is a very important technique of marketing in the modern business world. Viral marketing is important because it spreads the message about the goods and services very fast and if executed properly viral marketing can stand up against million-dollar marketing campaigns and be far more effective than

these marketing campaigns. Viral marketing can be extremely effective among the younger generation who are heavy users of social networks. When a firm employs viral marketing, the firm waits for the message to become viral, it depends on the targeted recipient to spread the message and popularize the message. Thus, the message must be attractive, powerful, something new that would easily create interest in the minds of the persons. If the message is not interesting enough, the messages may not be spread, and the viral marketing campaign will fail. Moreover, Viral marketing campaigns must be accompanied by other techniques of marketing to generate greater demand among all age groups. Since viral marketing is completely dependent on the social networks, viral marketing works with generally the younger generation, moreover not everyone gets attracted by online forms of advertising; most of the people still take their purchase decisions based on offline forms of advertising.

Thus, with the passage of time and technological advancements Viral Marketing is sure to become more and more popular. Even now, some million-dollar firms such as COCACOLA and BMW use viral marketing techniques. For startup companies, with low funds it is a great way to popularize their products and brand name, since the cost of viral marketing is very minimal, and it spreads extremely fast just like a virus and thus the name Viral Marketing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Here are some of our recommendations to companies that adopt use viral marketing techniques:

1. Viral Marketing's greatest advantage is that it is extremely low cost, but it spreads very fast. Thus, for startup companies who do not have adequate funds for Advertising through traditional methods, viral marketing is the most important technique of marketing.
2. For companies with low funds, trying to enter large markets viral marketing is a powerful tool for popularizing the brand name as social media is a powerful tool in every country be it small or large.
3. If a company wants to make themselves popular through viral marketing, it is best if they spread the message through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as these three social networks are the most preferred and the message is likely to spread faster and reach

many people.

4. Viral marketing mostly attracts people within the age group 18-27, because the people within this age group are heavy users of social networks. Thus, the message must be catered to fit the needs of this age group.

5. The message to be spread must be something new and attractive, something interesting, which will make the reader/recipient feel good and make him spread the message to his friends. If the message is dull, unattractive and boring, Viral marketing will not work. Thus, a lot of creativity is involved in viral marketing.

6. For companies with adequate funds it is advised that they should use both online and offline forms of advertising because the majority still considers offline forms of advertising much more effective than online forms of advertising.

7. Companies which rely only on viral marketing should improve the quality of their products and should put greater emphasis on customer satisfaction because it is extremely important for people to hear the experiences of others before buying a product or service from the internet.

8. For companies with no offline presence, it is advised that they should open forums where they can carry out direct conversations with the customers and answer and acknowledge consumer feedback. The consumers can post their problems in these forums and the company personnel can help them solve their problems. This will help to increase the trust of the consumers towards the brand or product and help them to develop brand loyalty.

9. For companies using viral marketing only, the prices of the products should be kept lower than those of the offline competitors. This will increase the sales of their products and attracts prospective buyers. If the prices are kept same as that of the offline competitors, people will prefer the offline competitor's products since they can have a physical examination of the products before buying them.

10. Lastly, viral marketing works only for products meant for the younger generation. For a company which sells products meant for the senior citizens or higher age groups viral marketing is not likely to work and thus these firms must focus on offline forms of advertising and marketing.

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