

Social Media-Driven Viral Marketing: A Strategic Approach to Leveraging Influencer Marketing for Enhanced Virality

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Abstract:

The advancement of technology and the rise of social media have significantly transformed how individuals interact and live. As people increasingly engage with online platforms, businesses are adapting their marketing strategies to effectively reach their target audiences. This shift has led to the evolution of connected marketing, social media marketing, and, most notably, viral marketing. Viral marketing involves sharing content on social media that spreads rapidly and exponentially. Initially, this approach was implemented through email campaigns; however, with the expansion of social media platforms, it has evolved into social media-based viral marketing, offering multiple channels for achieving virality and various interactive options. Despite its growing prominence, there is a lack of comprehensive theoretical frameworks in this area. Therefore, this study seeks to explore viral marketing within the context of social media and assess the strategic role of influencer marketing in enhancing content virality. The research is based on secondary data sourced from peer-reviewed journals and scholarly articles. Consequently, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of how influencer marketing can be effectively integrated with social media-based viral marketing.

Keywords: eWOM, Influencers Marketing, Social Media Marketing, Viral Marketing, Virality.

1. Introduction

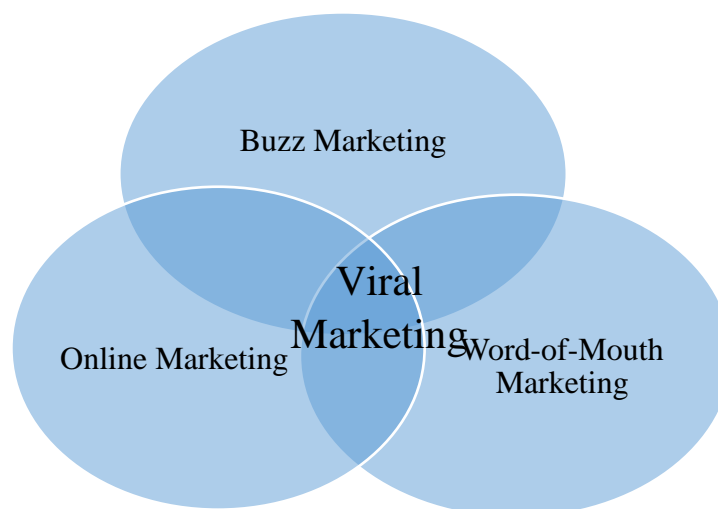
The last two decades have witnessed growth in the internet and online technology. This growth has also changed the fundamentals of marketing. Companies are now exploring effective methods of marketing through the internet and technology. While, on the other hand, the proliferation of the internet and the emergence of social media has developed a web of networks among people, providing them with opportunities to interact and influence each other (Abedniya & Sabbaghi, 2010; Feroz Khan & Vong, 2014). As, per the reports, the global social media penetration rate is currently 54 percent and is rising at a rapid pace (Statista, 2022). And the most commonly used social media includes Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram (Statista, 2022). While India ranks among the top internet users in the world. Social media in India has grown at a rapid pace over the past few years. Statistics revealed that India is crossing 500 million active users on social media with the following data (Table 1):

Total Population in India	1.40 billion
Active Social Media Users in India	0.467 billion
Number of Internet Users in India	0.658 billion
Number of Mobile Internet Users in India	0.601 billion

A report by Statista revealed that India has seen an increase of 45 percent in the internet penetration rate in 2021. Therefore, the companies are targeting these social media users directly to market their products and services. These social media-based marketing strategies are getting important day by day such as online marketing, e-word-of-mouth marketing, and social media marketing. And the most recent and popular among these is viral marketing.

1.1 Viral Marketing

Marketers are exploiting the opportunity of the increased share of social media in the increasing screen time strategically through the adoption of connected marketing. Connected marketing is a combination of buzz marketing when combined with word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing done using online channels/ media. Buzz marketing refers to the practice of creating interest and excitement among customers through developing and sharing noteworthy marketing messages (Rollins et al., 2014). Buzz leads to extensive reach and mass popularity of advertisement messages. The consequence of this online-created buzz and e-WOM, is the rapid sharing of content and interactions with it through comments, likes, hashtags, reviews, etc., thereby leading to its virality (Rollins et al., 2014). This phenomenon has led to the development of viral marketing. Fig. 1:



This concept was first mentioned by Rayport in 1996, in his article “The Virus of Marketing”. Viral marketing refers to a phenomenon where the marketing efforts either directed by the company or self-generated by the customers are stimulated through electronic word-of-mouth and customers feel it necessary to interact with the content and share it with their immediate peer group. This rapid sharing and interaction lead to the exponential spread of messages on social media thereby making them viral (Rollins et al., 2014). Nowadays, it is one of the most strategic ways to target a large segment of customers cost-effectively. Moreover, the customer-led virality and sharing of messages between social groups through trusted group members develop authenticity and increase the trustworthiness of shared messages (Rollins et al., 2014). Prior literature has proved that viral marketing has a strong influence on the purchase intentions of customers who either develop, read/listen to, or share viral content (Abedniya & Sabbaghi, 2010; Pescher et al., 2014).

2. Rationale of Study

The perspective of this paper is to examine the existing literature on customer-led viral marketing process to understand the determinants that influence the virality of content to provide a suggestion for the strategic application of influencers marketing of this viral marketing through social media networks. As discussed earlier, the traditional modes used for viral marketing have undergone a sea change. On the other hand, the advent of social media and continuous technological developments in it to enhance user interactions such as likes, comments, hashtags, shares, etc., has led to the emergence of new trends in viral marketing making it dynamic (Feroz Khan & Vong, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to review the concepts, existing theories, and underlying factors of viral marketing to understand the application of virality through social media platforms. Per se, the research will address the following proposed research questions:

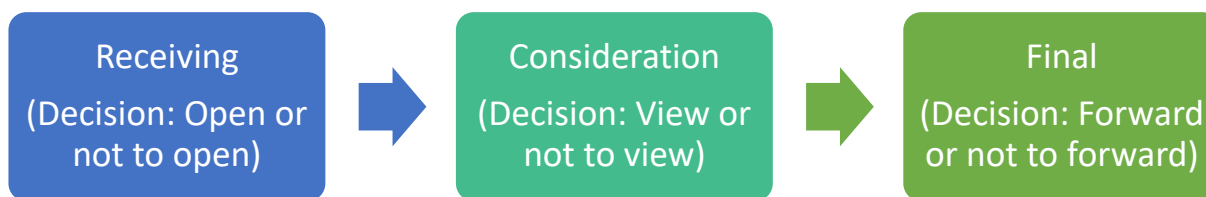
- Firstly, which decision-making model of viral marketing fits best in the context of social media-based virality?
- Secondly, what are the modes of interactions on social media that increases the virality of content posted by brands/companies?

- Thirdly, what are the major factors that influence the customer decision-making process in viral marketing?
- Fourthly, how influencer marketing can be applied in social-media-based viral marketing to generate virality?

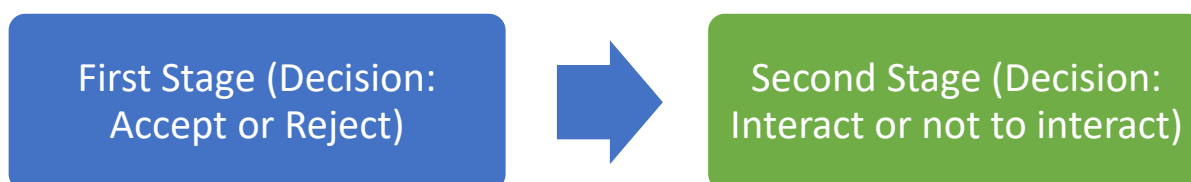
The research is based on secondary data collected from peer-reviewed journals, research publications, and scholarly articles.

3. Decision-Making Models in Viral Marketing

The decision-making process refers to the sequence of activities or decisions performed by an individual while encountering viral content. Being a cognitive exercise, decision-making involves the evaluation of all the aspects of viral content. The models on customer decision-making in viral marketing proposed by previous researchers are broadly three-staged models, based on e-mail-based viral marketing which was limited to sharing or forwarding as a way of spreading message or content (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008; Camarero & Jose, 2011, Palka, Pousttchi & Weildmann, 2009; Pescher, Reichhart & Spann, 2013). These models contend that the virality of content is derived from the decision of the individual to open a viral message, the decision to read/ view/ watch the content followed by a decision to forward that message to other people in his network. This process can be depicted as shown in Fig 2:



However, with the advent of new ways of interacting with content, a new two-stage model is proposed by Reichstein and Bruschi (2019) reflecting dynamism in customer decision-making while interacting with content. This model proposes two stages in the decision-making process. The first stage is a combination of the first two stages of traditional models i.e. opening and then accepting or rejecting the content. This model proposes that the first stage is obsolete as the content is already displayed when the user opens a social media application. Therefore, the only decision left is whether to accept/ read/ view/ listen to the content or not (Reichstien & Bruschi, 2019). Once the customer accepts the content the next stage is whether to interact with the content or not. This model is novel in the sense that it considers interaction instead of sharing or forwarding alone as a way of virality. Hence, the customer's decision to interact with the content has a direct relationship with its virality. The diagrammatic representation of this process can be depicted in Fig 3:



To sum up these, two models of customer decision-making are valid nowadays. However, in terms of relevance, the model proposed by Reichstein and Bruschi (2019) is more relevant in the social media context as social media offers many ways of interaction. These interactions range from liking, sharing, and commenting to reposting, etc. Also social media content is always present on the screen whenever the user login into a social media platform. Therefore, the decision stage involving to open or not to open the content is obsolete on social media.

4. Interaction Behavior in the decision-making process

Interaction behavior refers to the behavior exhibited by the customer while deciding on interacting with the content. This interaction is much more than forwarding and is generally based on a one-to-one or one-to-few mode of interaction. With the current development in social media applications, every platform offers multiple ways to express an opinion on content which increases virality. Different researchers have studied different social media platforms along with the modes of interactions there, which can lead to virality. This is depicted in the following table:

Studies on Modes of Interaction Behavior (Table 2)

Interactions Studied	Researchers/Authors and Year of Publication
Sharing	Yang & Zhou (2011); De Bruyn & Lilien (2008); Camarero & Jose (2011), Palka, Pousttchi & Weildmann (2009); Pescher, Reichhart & Spann (2013)
Liking, commenting, sharing	Kabadayi and Price, (2014)
Clicks, likes, comments	Maiz and Arranz, (2014)
Participation in Viral Campaigns	Tiago, Borges-Tiago and Cosme (2018)
Likes, Comments, page visits, reads, shares	Achen (2019)

For instance, liking, commenting, sharing, reposting, etc. content increases the virality of the content on which this interaction behavior is performed (Alhbash, 2015; Khan & Vong, 2019; Rechstein and Bruschi, 2019; Usmani et. al, 2019; Simmonds, Campbell and Hasley, 2021; Kulkarni, Karlo & Dinesh, 2021; Lee, Lazer & Riedl, 2022). Certain researchers have studied only sharing as a part of the interaction (Yang & Zhou, 2011; De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008; Camarero & Jose, 201, Palka, Pousttchi & Weildmann, 2009; Pescher, Reichhart & Spann, 2013).

While with the advent of new modes of interaction, virality was extended from sharing and forwarding to liking and commenting. Kabadayi and Price, (2014) conducted research to understand customer-brand engagement in liking and commenting based on virality with personality traits extroversion, Neuroticism, and openness. Similarly, Maiz and Arranz, (2014) studied the number of

clicks, likes, and comments as a mode of interaction on social media i.e. Facebook. Achen (2019) also studied Facebook interactions which broadly included likes, comments, page visits, reads, and shares using an eight-point rating scale, its impact on relationship quality, and purchase intentions. Tiago, Borges-Tiago, and Cosme (2018) studied user statistics from Facebook to understand interaction where they included participation in viral campaigns and sharing as the main methods of interaction. However, Riechstein & Bursch (2019) while developing a dynamic model of customer decision-making in viral marketing concluded that all the methods of interaction increase virality. Therefore, the trends of social media-based viral marketing have also undergone a sea change with the advancement in modes of interactions available to users.

5. Factors influencing Interaction Behavior

While interacting with viral content on social media, the interaction behavior i.e. liking/sharing/commenting/reposting, etc. is influenced by multiple factors. For instance:

Message characteristics

Message characteristics refer to the quality and nature of content delivered by companies through social media. The different appeals used to make message interesting also formed part of the message's characteristics. The following table describes the message characteristics that can drive the virality of content (Table 3).

Researchers/ Authors and Publication Year	Content Characteristics that Drive Virality
Yang and Zhou (2011)	Useful Messages
Milkman & Berger (2014)	Emotional Content
Golen and Zaidner (2008)	Humorous content
Berger & Milkman (2014); Cohen (2014)	Surprise emotion
Akpinar & Berger (2017)	Valuable Content

Apart from this, the shareable value of viral content also plays a significant role in determining forwarding behavior.

Source characteristics

Source refers to the person or the brand who is posting and sharing viral content. The characteristics of the source of content influence the individual's decision to interact.

Researchers/ Authors and Year of Publication	Source Characteristics Driving Virality
Aghdie et al. (2013); Gunawan and Huarng (2015)	Credibility of source

Camarero and San Jose (2011)	Closeness with source
Gunawan & Huarng (2015)	Relationship with source
Hinz et al. (2015); Zhang & Huang (2021)	Influencers as source
Arun and Arul (2020)	Source and trust

Also, the prevalence of influencer marketing on social media with loyal followers influences the decision to interact (Hinz et al., 2015; Zhang & Huang, 2021). Companies nowadays focus more on these influencers as they have more customer reach and drive loyalty. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the role of influencer marketing, especially influencers, in social media-based viral marketing.

6. Influencers Marketing

The concept of influencer marketing find its roots in 1955 when the concept of opinion leaders was proposed by Katz and Lazarsfeld. They are defined as individuals “who exert a disproportionately great influence on the vote intentions of their fellows” (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2006). This theory set the ground for modern-day influencers i.e. bloggers, vloggers, Instagrammers, etc. These digital influencers are defined as individuals "who frequently share their brand experiences regularly" (Uzunoğlu and Misc Kip, 2014). Collaborating with bloggers not only provides an opportunity for firms to shape consumers' buying behavior in favor of their products but also build long-term relationships with their target audience (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). Moreover, previous literature revealed that social media influencers are key to increasing virality in today’s time (Hinz et al., 2015; Zhang & Huang, 2021).

6.1. Influencers Marketing as a Tool to Generate Virality

Influencer marketing is a recent development to generate long-term customer engagement. The statistics of a study show that 60 percent higher campaign engagement rates are driven by social media influencers; those campaigns are 6.7 times more viral and effective. Following are the steps through which influencers generate virality:

Using campaign-specific hashtags: Campaign-specific hashtags are one of the best ways to spread brand awareness and drive virality (Hinz et al., 2015; Zhang & Huang, 2021). They allow social media influencers to connect easily with your brand.

Leveraging user-generated content: Companies allow influencers to post pictures, develop engaging videos, music, etc. suggesting authenticity and boosting virality (Arun & Arul, 2020). Studies show that 93% of consumers find user-generated content to be an influence when interacting with content.

Create sponsored posts: Sponsored posts are similar to user-generated content in that you focus on getting the influencers to post the content on their accounts. These posts drive up interactions leading to virality (Hinz et al., 2015; Zhang & Huang, 2021). These influencers hold significant power to drive e-WOM through online platforms.

Therefore, influencers are the apt source to generate, post, and forward content to make it a viral campaign. It is the upcoming trend in social media-based viral marketing that requires deep research from a theoretical perspective.

7. Conclusion and Future Directions

To conclude, social media-based viral marketing is the upcoming development in the literature of viral marketing. It is practically visible, however, theoretical literature is yet to develop. Since social media have different modes of interactions, new sources share the content to make it viral and also have the option to promote user-generated content, therefore social media-based viral marketing requires separate research and attention. Companies are continuously upgrading the modes of interactions, making interactions easy and interesting. Also, the use of influencer marketing to develop and post content on social media generates high virality. Therefore, the feasibility, benefits, and impact need to be studied in the context of social media-based viral marketing.

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