

A Literature Review on Viral Marketing: Concepts, Drivers, and Implications in the Digital Era

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Abstract

Viral marketing is an innovative form of digital marketing that is changing the game through the use of consumer interaction to spread brand messages. Social media platforms have become the norm, and as such, the following is a literature review that focuses on the following aspects: The conceptualization of viral marketing, The major drivers of viral marketing, Psychological and social factors, Viral marketing measurement, Managerial implications. It is also important to note the gaps in the literature, especially with regards to ethics, misinformation, and the use of artificial intelligence.

Keywords: Viral Marketing, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, Social Media, Consumer Behaviour, Digital Marketing, Content Sharing

1. Introduction

Digital revolution has dramatically changed the landscape of marketing communication with the advent of interactive and networking-based message diffusion (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Viral marketing is defined as “marketing practices that use consumers to spread messages exponentially through digital networks” (Dobele et al., 2007). Unlike traditional marketing communication, viral marketing is based on word-of-mouth communication, where consumers play an important role in diffusing the message.

In the past, the concept of "viral marketing" was first popularized in the late 1990s and was initially attributed to venture capitalist Steve Jurvetson to refer to the high growth rate of Hotmail. However, the concept has developed from the "tell-a-friend" email footers to the complex and multi-layered social media platforms. The social media sites like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and X (Twitter) have altered the digital diffusion process from the traditional linear communication pattern into the web-like pattern, whereby an individual can communicate to millions within a few hours. The theory of viral marketing is being explored extensively because of its ability to spread the message exponentially and inexpensively. Thus, the notion of viral marketing needs to be comprehended in light of the existing research.

Social media sites like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and X (Twitter) have rapidly revolutionized digital diffusion. Viral marketing has gained significant attention due to its potential to diffuse messages exponentially at low cost. Therefore, it is essential to understand the concept of viral marketing based on the findings of previous studies.

2. Conceptual Foundations of Viral Marketing

The concept of viral marketing was developed based on the idea of electronic word-of-mouth, where information is spread through virtual networks rather than face-to-face interactions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). While traditional word-of-mouth is based on face-to-face interactions, information diffusing through virtual networks is based on speed, scalability, traceability, and permanence (Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

The theoretical basis of viral marketing can be attributed to the concept of Diffusion of Innovation theory, where Rogers (2003) explained how information diffuses through social systems over a given period of time. Social Network theory emphasizes how information diffuses through social networks based on connected nodes (Watts & Dodds, 2007).

According to the literature, the viral nature of the content is seldom coincidental and is instead the result of content that is carefully designed and consistent with the motivations and patterns of the consumer (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011).

The theory behind the concept of viral marketing can be attributed to various sociological and psychological principles, including:

Diffusion of Innovation (DOI): Rogers (2003) described how information diffuses through social systems over a specified period of time. In this regard, "innovators" and "early adopters" act as a bridge to the "early majority."

Social Network Theory: This theory emphasizes how information diffuses through social networks based on connected nodes (Watts & Dodds, 2007). In this regard, "weak ties" between individuals, as described by Granovetter (1973), have been considered crucial for information diffusing across different social groups.

Memetics: The concept of "meme" was proposed by Dawkins (1976), where information can be considered a "replicator" and "mutates" and "selects" based on its "relevance" to the digital environment.

It can be seen from the literature that the "virality" of information is not coincidental but is often attributed to content that is "carefully designed" and "consistent" with the "motivations" of the consumer.

3. Key Drivers of Viral Marketing

3.1 Emotional Content

A major line of research suggests that emotional arousal is the primary factor in content sharing. Berger and Milkman (2012) show that high-arousing emotions, such as awe, excitement, humor, anger, and surprises, are associated with increased probabilities of sharing. Emotional connections are important because they are linked to cognitive processes and encourage consumers to share the content with their social networks.

Most importantly, research has made a distinction between valence, which can be positive or negative, and arousal, which relates to the physiological activation of the content. While positive content is generally more likely to go viral than negative content, negative high-arousal emotions, which include outrage, are shared much more than positive low-arousal emotions, which include contentment. This is why "rage-baiting" headlines tend to go viral more quickly than other content.

3.2 Social Influence and Identity

Social identity theory implies that users share content to enhance and confirm self-identity and belongingness (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Viral contents often allow users to communicate and present themselves as humorous, intelligent, moral, and trendy. Normative and information-based social influence also facilitate sharing behavior (Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

3.3 Content Characteristics

Recent studies also indicate the importance of algorithmic curation in spreading and limiting viral contents. Algorithmic engagement metrics influence content visibility (Tufekci, 2015). Network density, centrality, and nodes also facilitate rapid diffusion processes (Watts & Dodds, 2007).

In order to understand the reasons why content goes viral, Jonah Berger (2013) developed the STEPPS framework, which is considered one of the most important theories on viral marketing to date. STEPPS stands for:

Social Currency: Does it make the sharer look good?

Triggers: Is it "top of mind"? (e.g., Friday by Rebecca Black spikes every Friday)

Emotion: When we care, we share.

Public: Is it visible? "Built to show, built to grow."

Practical Value: Is it useful?

Stories: Is the message wrapped in a narrative?

3.4 Platform Algorithms and Network Structure

Contemporary literature highlights the importance of algorithmic curation in terms of expanding or constraining dissemination. Algorithms focus on engagement measures that affect the visibility of the material (Tufekci, 2015). Network density, centrality, and influential nodes substantially expedite diffusion processes (Watts & Dodds, 2007).

4. Psychological and Behavioural Mechanisms

The basis of viral marketing lies in psychological factors such as social currency, reciprocity, and expression (Berger, 2013). People tend to share information if they find it socially relevant. This can be further explained by the Theory of Planned Behaviour, which states that attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control influence the intention of viral sharing (Ajzen, 1991). Moreover, the Uses and Gratifications Theory supports the idea of entertainment, information-seeking, and social interaction as motivational factors of consumer behavior (Katz et al., 1973).

The literature commonly draws on a variety of behavioral theories to describe what underlies the "click" and "share" behavior:

- Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB): According to Ajzen (1991), the intention to share content is a result of attitudes toward content, perceived social pressure (subjective norms), and perceived ease of sharing (perceived behavioral control).
- Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT): This approach extends from "the effects of media on people" to "the effects of people on media." Consumers share content to satisfy needs for entertainment, information-seeking, and integrative functions (Katz et al., 1973).
- FOMO (Fear of Missing Out): This theory, a relatively new addition to the literature, has been seen as a powerful motivator, driving consumers to engage in "viral challenges" and trending hashtags in order to be socially relevant.

5. Measurement of Viral Marketing Effectiveness

Several approaches can be taken to measure the effectiveness of a viral marketing campaign: reach, impressions, number of shares, engagement rates, sentiment analysis, and conversion rates (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Nevertheless, a high level of engagement does not always

2010). Therefore, the measurement model should include quantitative measures of engagement and qualitative measures of brand perception.

There are various methods of measuring the success of a viral marketing campaign: reach, impressions, number of shares, engagement rates, and sentiment analysis (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). However, the literature has emphasized the importance of avoiding "vanity metrics," which are good on paper but do not contribute to the overall value of the company.

The "Viral Coefficient" (K) is a mathematical representation used to measure the growth rate:

$$K = i * c$$

Where i is the number of invitations/shares sent by each user and c is the conversion rate of those shares. If $K > 1$, the growth is exponential.

High engagement does not always equate to a good brand (Kozinets et al., 2010). Therefore, the model of measurement would include quantitative measures of engagement and qualitative measures of brand perception and "brand lift."

6. Managerial Implications

From the managerial's point of view, the benefits are cost efficiency, authenticity, and reach. However, the campaign is accompanied by significant uncertainty and control over the interpretation of the message. An efficient viral marketing campaign combines influencer marketing, data analysis, monitoring, and brand alignment mechanisms (Berger, 2013).

In terms of management, the advantages are cost efficiency and authenticity. However, managers need to shift from "controlling" the message to "facilitating" it.

Seeding Strategy: The quality of "seeds" (the influencers) matters more than the quantity of followers they have. Studies indicate that "micro-influencers" tend to have higher engagement rates and higher trustworthiness than celebrities.

The Control Paradox: Once a message has gone viral, a brand has no control over it. Consumers can use, distort, or even trash the message. Managers need to be ready for "hijacked" virality.

Brand Alignment: If a viral video does not refer to the brand's core values, then it has been a waste of resources. The message needs to be "integral" to the story, not just a brand logo tacked on at the end.

7. Ethical Issues and Challenges

Recent studies have raised ethical issues, manipulation, misinformation, violation of privacy, and exploitation (Tufekci, 2015). The distinction between organic and viral marketing is becoming less distinct. The need for transparency and the ethics of content and algorithmic control have increased in the digital age.

However, recent research has brought up some ethical issues of great concern. Some of the dark sides of viral marketing are as follows:

- **Astroturfing:** This refers to the creation of a false "grassroots" movement to artificially popularize a brand.
- **Privacy and Exploitation:** This refers to the use of "dark patterns" to trick people into sharing a piece of content or accessing their contact lists.
- **Misinformation and 'Fake News':** Since high-arousal content spreads the fastest, sensational or false content tends to spread more than true content. This has huge implications for brand safety, as ads can end up next to toxic viral content (Tufekci, 2015).
- **Algorithmic Bias:** This refers to the unintentional promotion of discriminatory content simply because it generates the most "engagement."

8. The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Virality

The literature is shifting to the impact of AI on digital diffusion.

Predictive Analytics: It can now predict how "virality ready" an individual's post will be even prior to publishing through analysis of visual composition, sentiment, and timing.

Generative AI (GenAI): Tools like ChatGPT and Midjourney can create top-notch content that goes viral; however, these tools may also bring up the concept of "content fatigue".

Virtual Influencers: These are AI-driven influencers who act as key players in the networked virality process, e.g., Lil Miquela.

9. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Some gaps have been observed from the literature as potential areas for research opportunities:

Long-Term Brand Effect: There is plenty of information on the "burst" of virality, however, little or no information on whether this "burst" contributes to long-term brand equity or just a one-time sales boost.

Negative Virality: There is plenty of information on "going viral," however, very little or no information on "going viral" for all the wrong reasons.

Cultural Perspective: There is plenty of information on "going viral" in western societies, however, very little or no information on "going viral" in collective societies, like India or China.

Dead Internet Theory: There is plenty of information on "going viral" and "going viral" for all the wrong reasons, but little or no information on "going viral" caused by bots.

10. Conclusion

The shift from the apex model of marketing to the horizontal, consumer-oriented viral marketing approach is arguably one of the most significant paradigm shifts in the history of communication. By reviewing all the pertinent literature on viral marketing, one has found that there are no accidents in terms of going viral, as this phenomenon is a combination of factors including the presence of high-arousal emotions, social identity cues, and algorithms. The process of sharing is a part of human nature in order to gain social capital.

However, the "digital era" that this literature review has discussed is not the current reality anymore. Instead, the world moves into an age when Artificial Intelligence and Generative Content would determine what authenticity means for

NIET Journal of Management (NIETJOM)

Volume 16, Issue 2 Winter / Summer 2025

ISSN: 0975-7643 (Print)

word-of-mouth communication. The emergence of deepfakes, virtual influencers, and bots created by Artificial Intelligence would make the next wave of marketers address the double-edged sword represented by extreme scalability and the complete obliteration of the brand because of misinformation. In this case, it becomes evident that a viral marketing campaign should include elements that go beyond vanity metrics such as “likes” and “shares.”

In essence, viral marketing should be understood within the context of the intersection between behavioral economics and network theory. While the channels for disseminating the idea may change, from TikTok and Instagram to the next big thing in social media technology, the psychology driving human interaction will remain constant. It is up to the scholar and practitioner at NIET Business School and elsewhere to harness this idea in an ethically sound way, transcending the concept of “controlled infection” and working towards the ideal wherein value is created within the consumer’s social network. As evidenced by the discussion above, this is possible through understanding the theoretical underpinnings that make it possible, understanding that in today’s age of information technology, “the message is no longer what the brand says to the consumer; it is what the consumer says to themselves.”

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**Publisher: Noida Institute of Engineering & Technology,
19, Knowledge Park-II, Institutional Area, Greater Noida (UP), India.**

NIET Journal of Management (NIETJOM)

Volume 16, Issue 2 Winter / Summer 2025

ISSN: 0975-7643 (Print)

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