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AN OVERVIEW OF VIRAL MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars and practitioners invest a great deal of time and effort to demystify the tools for shining through marketing messages. Harnessing the power of online technologies and quick (online) spread of word of mouth has yielded greatly positive results for markets. However, some of the dimensions of effectiveness are yet to be explored. In view of this, viral marketing has earned itself the reputation of a strategic tool that has the power to influence customers rapidly and offer extra value through means of innovative marketing practices. The aim of this article is to review different definitions of viral marketing (VM), its characteristics and campaign design specifics. On this premise, literature gaps are identified, and a future research agenda is proposed. Results show that on one hand novel marketing experiences can influence positively the consumer response to marketing actions and on the other – can equip companies with opportunities to capture attention quickly and stand out from their main rivals. This paper is particularly relevant to the modern developments in the marketing domain given the growth of social media networks and the ways people communicate with brands.

KEYWORDS

viral marketing, social media, marketing strategy, WOM

INTRODUCTION

Effectiveness of marketing campaigns is a major battlefield for most marketing experts. Brands strive to connect with customers in more interactive ways so as they can more successfully capture their attention. Modern-day technologies (including but not limited to A.I., machine learning, deep learning, sentiment analysis) allow market players to engage with clients in a more interactive and intuitive manner. Along with this, customers themselves become influential brand ambassadors with their own (online and offline) networks of contacts. In this respect, companies can identify substantial (and influential) nodes within different social media platforms and attempt to maximize marketing results through sharing of messages. Not only does this multiply the outreach of messages, but it also gives more credibility to the source (given it is often a human being as opposed to algorithm/machine).

Viral marketing (VM) is (often described as) a strategy that utilizes existing relationships within social networks to promote a product/service via sharing. Essentially, customers share information they consider relevant to other users of their network(s) and that is sometimes colloquially viewed as a spread of a virus. Viral marketing has seen unprecedented growth in the last decade given the digital

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breakthroughs and the fact that people tend to trust more other people (rather than marketers) in a marketing world that is more and more leaning towards the absence of human-delivered services.

Taking a more holistic view of the subject matter, one can observe that companies are urging to reward influencers to be the senders of the initial message. It is believed that they can incentivise recipients to disseminate the message further so as a “virus effect” can be achieved (quick circulation of communication). The processes involved can have multiple positive effects:

- 1) customer awareness;
- 2) acquisition;
- 3) retention;
- 4) brand image;
- 5) quick promotion, among others.

Yet, due to the taxonomical challenges (related to defining the borders of the term “viral marketing”) as well the varied practices and tools that are in the same domain, there is a need for further investigation of the characteristics and manifestations of VM.

This article aims to examine the different definitions and manifestations of VM alongside with advantages and disadvantages. Based on that, a viral marketing campaign design is critically analysed and characteristics of VM in existing literature are presented. Finally, the paper takes a closer look at recent studies in the field and provides a future research agenda. The nature of the article is conceptual yet very practically oriented. We acknowledge that the nature of VM is dynamic and multifaceted.

VIRAL MARKETING AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

Viral marketing is a term that is first mentioned by D. Rushkoff in his book where it is portrayed as a “media virus” (Salvador, 2014). Nevertheless, Rayport (1996) makes the original formulation of the term. Multiple sources (Moore, 2003, Cruz, Fill, 2008; Salvador, 2014; Kostić et al., 2015), however, put forward the name of T. Draper and the example of Hotmail as the beginning of the VM implementation. It is also important to note that viral marketing has been defined as either a technique (Woerdl et al., 2008, Wolter et al., 2016) or a strategy (Moore, 2003). For the purposes of this study the authors will consider viral marketing as a strategy.

Viral marketing has had multiple name changes with an interpretation that can be seen below.

Table 1. Variations of viral marketing

Buzz marketing	Stealth marketing	Electronic referral marketing (ERM)
Word-of-mouth (marketing)	E-word of mouth (marketing)	Internet WOM
Viral advertising	Network marketing	Interactive marketing

Source: Goldenberg et al., 2001, De Bruyn, Lilien, 2004, Cruz, Fill, 2008, Chen, Lee, 2014, Kostić et al., 2015

What can be observed from Table 1 is that VM is sometimes used interchangeably with stealth marketing when according to research, it is considered as part of it (Kaikati, Kaikati, 2004). Another important aspect that must be pointed out is that VM is thought to belong to the so-called guerilla marketing which

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is characterised by the selection of odd marketing activities with the objective to create an impact (Nufer, 2013). What is more, the second row of the table links VM to word-of-mouth (WOM). The WOM communication topic has been at the centre of attention in both the academic and business world for decades (De Bryun, Lilien, 2008).

The WOM facet that can be seen as part of VM's key characteristics is the one regarding dissemination and sharing speed (Woerdl et al., 2008). According to one study (Wang, 2019), there are two forms of WOM: (1) traditional WOM (face-to-face, offline) and (2) e-WOM. Regarding e-WOM, one source (Hossain et al., 2019) defines it as a VM strategy. This is evidence that while some studies (Chen and Lee, 2014; Kostić et al., 2015) equalise VM to e-WOM, there are others (Hossain et al., 2019) who support a different opinion. Wolter et al. (2016) further differentiates e-WOM from VM on the grounds that e-WOM is rather an "informal bottom-up phenomenon". What can be concluded is that VM has experienced a change in taxonomy but has also been linked to other families of terms. This creates confusion and further challenges when researchers continue to build over the term itself through their studies.

From the aforementioned, it can be concluded that VM exhibits volatility in interpretation. However, this volatility is only to a certain extent. The reason behind this is that VM shares a base of characteristics from the terms that have been mentioned above. Nonetheless, it is the full combination of attributes that VM has that sets it apart from the rest. These characteristics can be seen below:

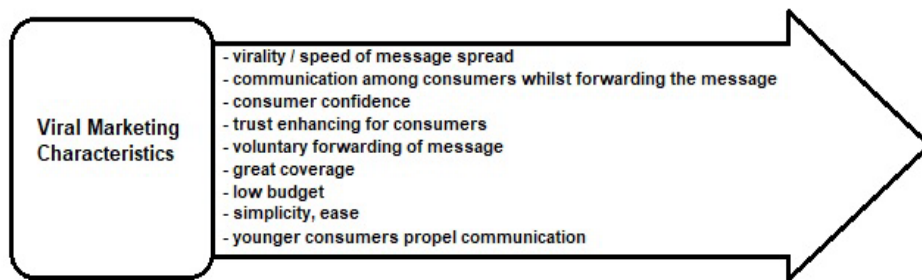


Figure 1. VM Characteristics

Source: Rakic and Rakic, 2014

With regards to the above figure, virality is defined as the pooling of a high number of views in a short period of time due to sharing (Tellis et al., 2019). In order to reach virality, however, one must "get the right people talking about the product or service without it appearing to be company-sponsored" (Kaikati, Kaikati, 2004). The same source also considers this to be the main objective of VM to which the researchers agree. Furthermore, when talking about the "right people" another study (Rakic, Rakic, 2014) has found that the younger consumers are, the higher the chances of them participating in viral communications. This can be considered as another characteristic of VM.

The first typology that is presented is the one mentioned by Woerdl et al. (2008):

Table 2. VM typology

Type	Social Interaction	Unintentional	Commercial
Motive	Communication	Communication	Create interest
Visibility	Intangible	Identifiable	Intention driven
Intention	Not viral	Not viral or concealed viral	Open viral vs. concealed viral
Basis	Social	Social and/or commercial	Commercial

Source: Woerdl et al., 2008

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As can be seen from the table above, VM is broken down into three categories with different characteristics pertaining to them. Diving deeper into the topic of typology, what is presented further is the research surrounding mobile VM strictly. Wiedemann (2007) elaborates on the topic by introducing the following mobile VM types:

Table 3. Mobile VM typology

Level of network externalities	High	Motivated Evangelism	Signaling Use, Group Membership
	Low	Targeted Recommendation	Awareness Creation and Benefits Signaling
		Active	Passive
		Role of communicator in persuasion	

Source: Wiedemann, 2007

According to the typology offered above, the authors conclude that depending on the two main variables both researchers and practitioners can craft such a VM strategy that would yield a higher success rate given the risk taken is appropriate. Furthermore, when comparing the overall VM typology with this particular one, what can be seen is that the active role of the communicator in persuasion matches with the commercial basis in the table for VM typology. Moreover, the level of network externalities matches with the visibility and intention aspects of the table prior to the last one. Therefore, what can be concluded is that as expected, mobile viral marketing uses the overall VM typology as a base on which to expand.

The advantages and disadvantages of VM are as follows (Dobele et al., 2005, Woerdl et al., 2008):

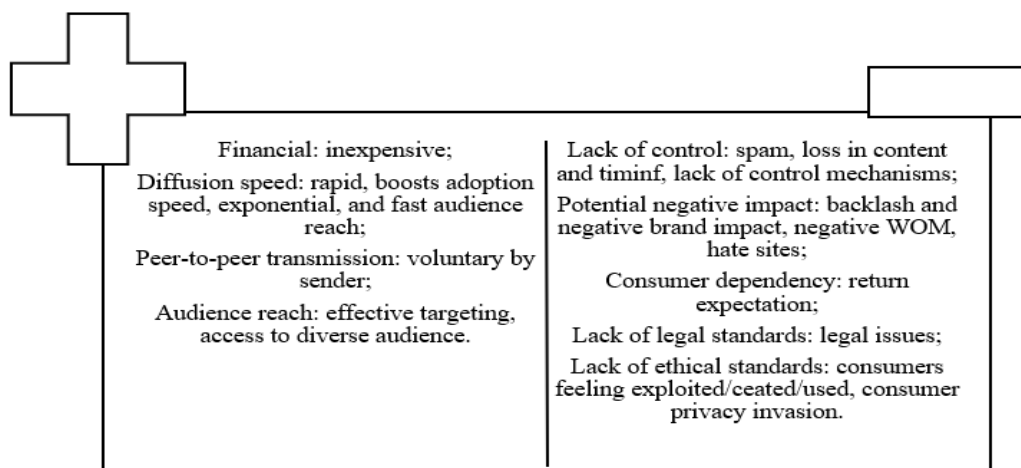


Figure 2. VM advantages and disadvantages

Source: Dobele et al., 2005, Woerdl et al., 2008

What can be observed from Figure 2 above is the fact that the disadvantages are currently outweighing the advantages. This is a barrier for practitioners to opt for applying VM in their campaigns. There will always be variables that will be out of control for the company in terms of the influence of VM outcomes (Baltezarevic, 2016). However, this risk can be lowered if practitioners oversee the variables that can be controlled before the message is released. Moreover, the focal point of VM is the fact that it has a high potential in message dissemination and low cost: two factors that have never been able to be combined

before given the cost of traditional media. This leaves the authors of the opinion that the potential of VM is higher than the losses that can occur.

With regards to the benefits associated with mobile VM, Persaud and Azhar (2012) also state that this marketing strategy is easy and inexpensive. However, they also highlight a possible negative side of mobile VM (and in the authors' opinion – VM in general): the fact that there is limited guarantee that the consumers will be willing to receive marketing messages on their phones. Comparing the pros and cons of the "normal" and mobile VM there is no clear line that marks a difference. Thus, the authors recognise the differences between them in the characteristics and typology.

STAGES OF VIRAL MARKETING CAMPAIGN DESIGN

On the topic of VM campaigns what must be discussed is the stages that those type of campaigns go through (Kostić et al., 2015):

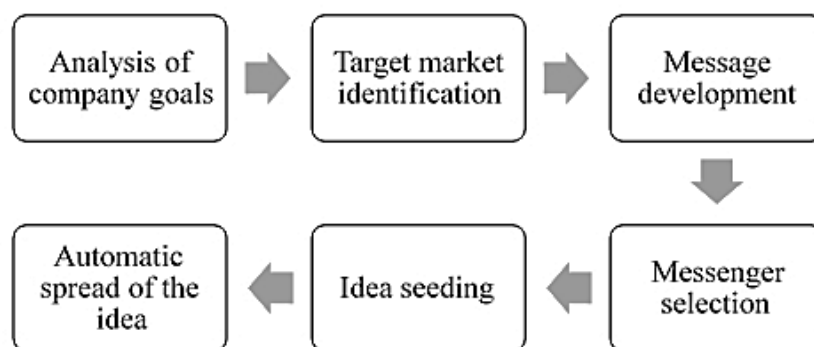


Figure 3. Stages of a VM campaign

Source: Kostić et al., 2015

The best example that portrays the validity of the figure from above according to the authors is the viral marketing campaign coming from ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) association known as "The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge". The initial state of the campaign included a very "blunt challenge" that later on shifted with the message being re-branded to take the form which is presented above (Baltezarevic et al., 2016). Furthermore, a good message was developed that went from either throw ice at yourself or donate to throw ice at yourself and donate (Baltezarevic et al., 2016) that was then accompanied by the final message. This then resulted in idea seeding and expanded substantially through the automatic spread of the idea (evidence of which is the execution of the challenge by Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates). As for the stages of the VM campaign, what is seen in this specific case is that there are clear goals present with a good initial target market since in the end the challenge was made viral. Other examples of VM are The Dark Knight campaign, "Let's Say Thanks" campaign by Xerox, Venus razor campaign by Gillette and "Life's for Sharing" campaign by T-mobile (Larson, 2009). However, even if there are stages that can be anticipated and followed through for a campaign, research is yet to discover possible ways in which the effectiveness of VM campaigns can be measured (Freed, 2019) and controlled.

The study conducted by Kostić et al. (2015) proves that there is an evident process with a well-established structure regarding VM campaigns. However, Chiu et al. (2014) is of the opinion that there are times where "one size fits all" cannot be applied. The reason they give is that such campaigns must



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be tailored to the individual characteristics and the approach (Chiu et al., 2014). The authors agree that the approach does play a vital part in any VM campaign. Two of the reasons for this are the difference in industries and the context (whether it is B2C or B2B) the campaign is situated in. Nonetheless, the first reason given by Chiu et al. (2014) regarding the individual characteristics is already present in the study of Kostić et al. (2015) through the target market identification stage. Thus, this eliminates it as a reason to not be able to have generalised stages of VM campaign development.

CHARACTERISTICS OF VIRAL MARKETING IN EXISTANT LITERATURE

When more thoroughly examined, the roots of VM date back to an era when technology was limited. As Salvador (2014) states, it was only until the boom of social networks when the pattern of mass distribution content was altered. The same study presents as such the start of the social media revolution to be made by Friendster (2002), MySpace (2003), Facebook (2004), and Twitter (2006). Nowadays, what is left in existence from the aforementioned media are Facebook and Twitter (now named X) as well as the new additions – TikTok and Instagram.

Throughout the years, a plethora of research has been conducted on the topic of VM. Almeida et al. (2016) has identified a total of four groups of studies that share the same characteristics which are presented below.

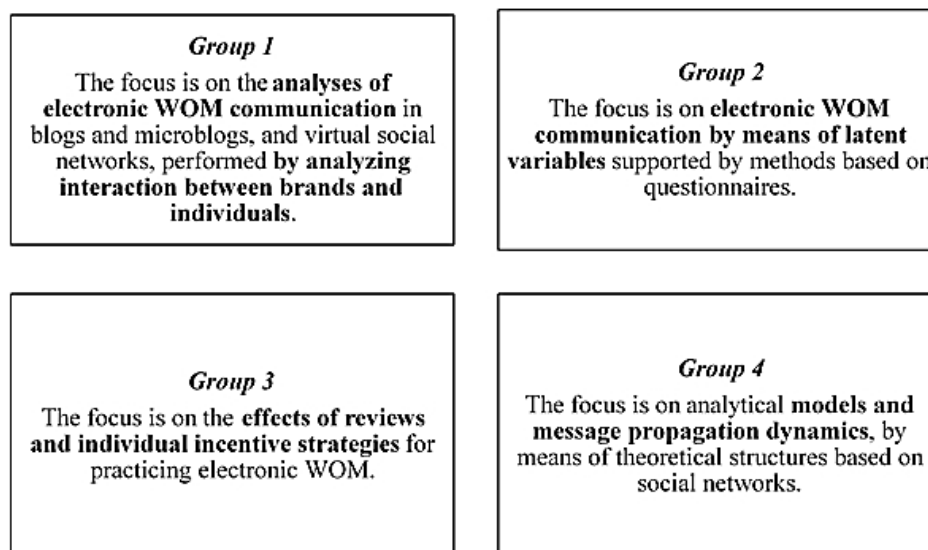


Figure 4. Characteristics of studies on VM
Source: Almeida et al., 2016

What can be concluded from the table above is that all researchers have focused on the communication process itself and its varying dimensions such as the message, dynamics, brand and individuals' interaction, and reviews. By and large, what can be seen from past studies is WOM's inherent divergence and yet convergence to VM. The communication medium used in VM which is Internet (Woerd, 2008) and the emergence of social media that lead to exponential growth (Kobia, 2014) in information transfer are the sources of the divergence between the two terms. In other words, technological advances create



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the gap present between VM and WOM (Cruz, Fill, 2008, Kostić et al., 2015). The convergence, however, stems from the fact that the underlying characteristics of the traditional WOM are evidently present in VM (Woerdl et al., 2008, Kobia, 2014). That is why the authors believe that it is not only the technological advancement that has led to the label given to VM as an “electronic extension of WOM” (Cruz, Fill, 2008), but also the existence of the WOM phenomenon itself.

PRESENT–DAY STUDIES IN THE FIELD OF VM

The most recent trends connected to VM research (between 2021 and 2024) are:

Table 4. Contemporary studies in the VM domain

Research topic from VM perspective	Studies
Purchasing Intentions	Fitriani et al. (2022), Muhajir et al. (2022), Mustikasari et al. (2023), Widyarsih et al. (2023)
Purchasing Decisions	Agesti et al. (2021), Fitri et al. (2021), Hamade (2021), Madjid et al. (2022), Mardiana, Haryanto (2022), Anindya, Indriastuti (2023), Putri, Rahyuda (2023), Alfarez et al. (2024), Lestari et al. (2024), Praditya, Purwanto (2024)
Meme marketing	Ngo (2020)
Banking	Mustafa, Almrafee (2022), Roy et al. (2022)
Live streaming/broadcasting	Wang (2022), Bakti, Sari (2024)
Online opinions/trust	Liyanapathirana (2021), Tu and Neumann (2022)
Impact on SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) and micro-companies	Jasin (2022), Erwin et al. (2023), Purwanto et al. (2023)

Sources: Ngo, 2020, Agesti et al., 2021, Fitri et al., 2021, Hamade, 2021, Fitriani et al., 2022, Jasin, 2022, Liyanapathirana, 2021, Madjid et al., 2022, Mardiana, Haryanto, 2022, Muhajir et al., 2022, Mustafa, Almrafee, 2022, Roy et al., 2022, Tu and Neumann, 2022, Wang, 2022, Anindya, Indriastuti, 2023, Erwin et al., 2023, Purwanto et al., 2023, Putri, Rahyuda, 2023, Mustikasari et al., 2023, Widyarsih et al., 2023, Alfarez et al., 2024, Bakti, Sari, 2024, Lestari et al., 2024, Praditya, Purwanto, 2024

The first research topic is regarding purchasing intentions. Due to the contrary conclusions (Mustikasari et al. (2023) and Widyarsih et al. (2023) state VM has an insignificant impact on the purchase intentions, while Fitriani et al. (2022) and Muhajir et al. (2022) state the opposite - it is hard to conclude that VM has a positive and significant effect over the purchase intentions. The biggest body of research found was related to the purchasing decisions. All of the research listed concludes that VM has a positive impact on the customer purchase decision. A very limited but unique topic that was found was the one regarding meme marketing introduced by Ngo (2020). Meme marketing is defined as the promotion of a product by adopting the use of viral user-generated content (also known as a meme). Memes and the culture surrounding them has been continuing to grow in the past few years and as such, the authors are of the opinion that this topic deserves to be highlighted.



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Banking is a topic that is also studied by scholars in terms of VM. On one hand, Mustafa and Almrafee (2022) state that VM has a positive influence over motivating consumers to use the services of a commercial bank. On the other, Roy et al. (2022) provide suggestions on how a bank can adopt VM in order to have a better influence over their customers. With regards to the live streaming/broadcasting topic, VM has not only a positive effect on live broadcasting (Wang, 2022), but also when combined with live streaming it can further positively influence the purchasing decision (Bakti and Sari, 2024). The online opinion/trust research expands on the fact that VM has a positive influence on online trust (Liyanapathirana, 2021) and on the polarisation in the network opinions stated (Tu and Neumann, 2022). The studies regarding the impact on SME and micro-companies confirm that VM enhances the marketing performance (Purwanto et al., 2023), increases the competitiveness (Jasin, 2022), and client engagement (Erwin et al., 2023).

Finally, there is one variable that is used as an additional layer in the research for VM from above and that is the brand image one. Examples include the studies of Madjid et al. (2022), Praditya and Purwanto (2024), Putri and Rahyuda (2023), and Widyarsih et al. (2023). From these, the research of Madjid et al. (2022) most clearly states the connection between VM and brand image. VM is a message carrier. The message itself carries the product of a certain company. The product represents the brand and is recognised by consumers through the brand image. That is why this paper recognises the significance of brand image.

GAPS AND FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

A gap that was found in the literature above is the lack of research made on the willingness of consumers to receive marketing messages on their phones which was highlighted by Persaud and Azhar (2012) with regards to VM expansion. Furthermore, other relevant gaps and future research recommendations recognised from Table 4 are the following:

Table 5. Gaps and future research recommendations

Research topic from VM perspective	Gap and future research
Purchasing Intentions	Further use of additional factors (content variables, customer experience and etc) that influence the purchase interest (Fitriani et al., 2022)
Purchasing Decisions	Further research on other variables that will influence the purchase decision such as brand image (Mardiana, Haryanto, 2022, Praditya, Purwanto, 2024); creation of a unanimous and better definition for VM itself as a term (Hamade, 2021)
Meme marketing	Further standardisation of the research itself is needed in terms of user-generated content (memes) as well as sample expansion (Ngo, 2020)
Banking	Expansion on factors that may have an effect on the impact of VM (Mustafa, Almrafee, 2022)
Live streaming/broadcasting	Need for further population data enrichment in order for better accuracy of the findings to be established (Bakti, Sari, 2024)



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Online opinions/trust	Expansion of the sampling methods and sample size used in order to provide more focused data regarding how age and income further affect the variables (Liyanapathirana, 2021)
Impact on SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) and micro-companies	Expansion of the sample itself in order for data to show answers for other geographical regions (Erwin et al., 2023)

Sources: Ngo, 2020; Hamade, 2021; Liyanapathirana, 2021; Fitriani et al., 2022; Mardiana and Haryanto, 2022; Mustafa and Almrafee, 2022; Erwin et al., 2023; Bakti and Sari, 2024; Praditya and Purwanto, 2024

From the table above it can be concluded that most of the research recommends either further expansion into factors that may affect the main variables or further development of the sample itself (whether that will be in terms of size, methods and etc.).

Last but not least, from the reviewed characteristics of studies on VM, it was concluded that the communication process itself and its varying dimensions such as the message, dynamics, brand and individuals' interaction, and reviews have been most widely used as variables. Therefore, these dimensions should be considered as valuable variables in any future research and must be taken carefully into account by both researchers and practitioners.

CONCLUSION

This paper has summarized the body of literature by presenting an overview of different variations, characteristics, typologies, advantages and disadvantages, campaign design, and contemporary studies on the topic of viral marketing. The aim of the study has been accomplished through the provision of the abovementioned elements with regards to viral marketing. Notable conclusions that must be highlighted are that viral marketing is a strategy that has a history of vast terminology variations which has created confusion and a challenge for researchers when using this term. Furthermore, viral marketing includes two advantages - high potential in message dissemination and low cost, which have not been combined before with regards to traditional media. Moreover, the stages of a viral marketing campaign must be altered based on the context. Lastly, contemporary studies in the literature of viral marketing portray that research is interested in topics that revolve around purchasing intentions and decisions, meme marketing, banking, live broadcasting/streaming, online opinions/trust and impact on SMEs and micro-companies.

The practical implications of this study are connected to the provision of a better understanding of what viral marketing is, its usage purpose and what opportunities it can give to practitioners such as cost minimisation and message spread maximisation. Furthermore, a standardised process of the viral marketing campaign is provided which adds order in a strategy which relies solely on the virality of a message.

This study has provided guidance for future research in terms of pointing out the need for further expansion into factors that will affect the mentioned studies' variables as well as further sample development.



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