

Chapter 53

Is It Worth Sharing?

Evaluating the Role of Content and Emotions in Viral Marketing

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ABSTRACT

Social media has been found to have created a paradigm shift in the digital marketplace by giving a new technological face to marketing, highlighting on brand awareness and effectiveness. In this digital marketplace, emotions lead users to like or dislike, share or not to share messages, thus evoking, influencing and shifting public opinions on everything from political parties to corporate reputations, brands, products etc. It is important to understand how emotions and content relevance make these messages go viral. To explore this relationship, in-depth interviews with people of Generation Y were conducted, who were shown two videos that have gone viral. Findings focus on how the content of these videos and emotions generated will lead the respondents to share them online. Further this study helped design a Emo-Cog (emotion – cognition) induced decision tree model which the generation Y consumers might frequently be using to decide on whether to share the videos or not. The discussion unveils future avenues highlighting emotions in viral marketing.

INTRODUCTION

Long since the advent of Internet, it has been seen that an organization's environment consists of a plural network of stakeholders in which many-to many communication allows individuals to be either the sender or receiver of messages, while also modifying and elaborating information (Illia, 2002). This results in the formation of an interconnected network where a huge influx of messages, content and information in the form of texts, pictures, videos and audios get passed on from one stakeholder to the next with immense speed and reach. Messages, spread through the online social networks, become viral. A very prominent example of viral communication through the medium of viral messaging, would be the protest of 2011 in Egypt where online protests towards a strong feeling for an idea was converted into a mass movement, say the protesters and the analysts (Choudhary, Hendrix, Lee, Palsetia& Liao, 2012).

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The speed of viral communication has its roots in the concept of WOM (word of mouth phenomenon) which was the only way to market one's goods before the advent of the printing press, broadcast media and the Internet. An analogy of cause and effect relationship can be drawn between viral marketing and WOM. Viral marketing, a term first introduced by Knight in 1996 (Phelps, 2004) is like a virus that spreads across the social media. It may be defined as the 'cause' because it might take the form of influencing marketing programs, community-building portals, viral videos and street-level guerilla campaigns thus building awareness and buzz. Whereas positive WOM might be the 'effect' because theoretically it leads to trial and acquisition (Ferguson, 2008). The publication of Fred Reichheld's, *The Ultimate Question* and one of the top viral promotional campaigns like Dove's 'Real Beauty Sketches' convince even the most stubborn marketers to pursue viral marketing, in other words to leverage the potential of a product to a greater extent than it would have reached otherwise. Thus conversations between stakeholders can now reach the global audience within seconds by communicating, sharing and forwarding messages through viral communication.

Although Viral marketing campaigns have attracted huge attention due to the fact that it can connect and reach people disregarding their geographical locations, but lack of success can be attributed to the fact that there is lack of understanding in what contributes to the success of viral marketing (Phelps, 2003), despite the fact that several efforts have been used to understand what leads to the sharing of videos online. Content sharing plays a very vital role here. Content sharing is the fastest growing activity among Facebook users, with 7 billion pieces of content shared each week (Unruly Media, 2012). This is in part the result of increasing growth and popularity of social media in the recent years, and in part due to the emergence of the 'Connection generation' who crave interaction and connection with vast networks like never before (Pintado, 2009). Thus online video sharing that has risen due to the video sharing giant 'YouTube', combined with improved sharing functionality across most social networking sites, has successfully cemented one of the most important roles in viral marketing (Cashmore, 2009; Eckler & Bolls, 2011). If a viral video campaign is executed properly with precision, a viral video campaign is said to offer the marketer many benefits that ranges from extended mass reach of the campaign, publicity of the brand as well as reduced advertising costs (Dobele, Lindgreen, Beverland, Vanhamme, Wijk, 2007; Eckler & Bolls, 2011). Thus there are some videos which are shared thousand times in a few hours while others may suffer a miss and what leads to this kind of content sharing, many a times remains unknown. This research tries to highlight on these aspects of content sharing in viral marketing.

Some authors have tried to explain that emotions play a role in making messages go viral (Dobele et al., 2007; Phelps., 2003). An investigation was done with viral campaigns which explained that it is the emotions experienced by the viewer (and the strength with which they are felt) and not creative elements that are used within the content, that triggers forwarding behavior (Dobele et al., 2007). There is an important part played by emotional resonance that users experience which might be a cause behind forwarding behavior, to be explained in the later part of the study

Previous studies have tried to integrate and generalize an understanding of what role these video messages intend to play in the mind of the users and how the consecutive forwarding behavior takes place; however this study tries to bring out a relation between the role of user's ability to relate to the video as well as share it based on the emotional reaction to it. An important aspect of this study is that, firstly it gives a better understanding of what leads to online content sharing. Secondly it tries to highlight on the relational importance between the role of emotional reaction (based on relevance to the user) and online content sharing in the domain of viral marketing. Thirdly it also proposes the Emotion-Cognition induced decision tree the users may use which acts as an aid to help them decide on what content should

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