ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing popularity of viral advertising, its effectiveness for high involvement products is under question. Moreover, its effect on brand recall and recognition has not been evaluated yet. To fill the gap, a 2 advertising type (viral vs normal) by 2 product category (high involvement vs low involvement) factorial design was conducted. Results indicate that viral ads significantly enhance attitudes, purchase intention and forwarding intention for both low and high involvement products. After one week delay, recall and recognition were measured. Results revealed that viral ads significantly lead to better aided brand recall, unaided brand recall and brand recognition than non-viral ads. While the influence of viral ad on brand recall and recognition for high involvement products is stronger than low involvement products, its influence on attitudes and purchase behavior for high involvement products is weaker than low involvement products.

Keywords: Attitude, Emotional Content, Product Involvement, Purchase Intention, Viral Advertising

INTRODUCTION

Mass media advertising has become too expensive for brands to maintain a continuous media presence (Kirby & Marsden, 2006). Moreover, the growing lack of trust in marketing communications has made consumers seek information from personal social networks as a trustworthy source for their purchase decisions (Allsop et al., 2007). With increasing penetration of Internet into consumers’ life, viral advertising has emerged as an efficient marketing tool to reach a huge number of people in a short time and spread word of mouth about brands. Viral campaign offers non-interruptive solution for companies trying to acquire new customers and keep the old ones. While consumers often find unsolicited commercial message of a company
irritating, such a message is considered favorably if it comes from a member of the message receiver’s social network (Phelps et al., 2004).

As Eckler and Bolls (2011) point out, some advertising practitioners and managers believe that viral ads are effective if they reach a huge number of potential customers (e.g. one million people), but actually the goal of viral marketing is twofold: forwarding behavior and consumption (Dobele et al., 2007). Viral ads should affect consumers’ attitudes, memory and purchase behaviors. Although viral advertising generally has been found effective, its effectiveness for different product categories (high vs low involvement) has not been investigated yet. Moreover, none of the previous studies have evaluated the influence of viral advertising on brand recall and recognition. Consumers are being bombarded with promotional activities every day and it became very difficult for brands to find a way into consumers’ memory and get recalled or recognized due to contextual interference and decreased attention to the promoted brands (Zhang et al., 2009). Second, memory performance declines with passage of time (Howard & Kahana, 1999). Since purchase behavior usually occurs after a delay of some days or weeks from ad exposure, passage of time decreases advertising effect on recall and recognition especially when brand is unfamiliar to consumers. These indicate the necessity of considering brand recall and recognition as important measures of viral ad effectiveness. To fill the gap, we provide an overview of viral advertising considering emotional execution as the most important aspect of viral ads. Then we try to evaluate the effectiveness of viral ads considering the moderating role of product involvement.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Viral Advertising**

Viral advertising is defined as “unpaid peer-to-peer communication of provocative content originating from an identified sponsor using the internet to persuade or influence an audience to pass along the content to others” (Porter & Golan, 2006). Viral advertising has great potential for brands. First, it is an efficient promotion tool since the consumers themselves transfer the message and it doesn’t need paying for media (Porter & Golan, 2006). Second, it enhances consumer’s evaluation. Advertisers believe that the message will be viewed favorably if it has been recommended by a friend or a member of the personal social network. Third, it provides opportunities for brand engagement, since viewers decide to watch the ad on their own free will. Forth, it allows for interaction, more exposures, leaving a comment and reading other consumers’ reviews (Southgate et al., 2010). Fifth, it allows accurate targeting. Since the initially targeted customer knows the tastes and needs of his social network members; he or she also knows which people will benefit from the product (Dobele et al., 2005). Therefore, the product gets targeted to those people that will really benefit from the product. Finally, it allows for creating and releasing longer commercials which in turn may increase effectiveness, contrary to TV commercials which have length limitation due to high broadcasting expenses.

The strength behind the viral campaign lies in that it leverages the power of word-of-mouth through an electronic medium. Word-of-mouth has been found to have a higher impact than advertising on consumer’s buying behavior and a significant influence in the diffusion of new products (Kirby & Marsden, 2006). Word of mouth is more credible than marketing communications because it is perceived to come from an unbiased source of “people like me” (Allsop et al., 2007). While WOM occurs naturally between consumers, there are marketing activities implemented in order to intentionally influence the peer-to-peer communications. The relationship between WOM and viral advertising is the matter of cause and effect. WOM is created as a result of viral campaign. However, it is commercial content that
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