

Chapter 10

An Investigation of the Evaluation of the Viral Marketing Research

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to locate the key schools of thought in viral marketing (VM) literature, recognise the various sub-sets within viral marketing overall area of research and to identify the different gaps in viral marketing research literature offering a summation of the existing work done so far. The paper tries to build on the existing body of literature in the field of viral marketing, its related electronic word of mouth (eWOM) context and to present a taxonomic classification for future research. The review uses the paradigm funnel to examine the development of VM, key research contributions and categorises the published literature according to their objectives, analytical approaches and their contributions to theory. The literature addresses many subjects of study (e.g. E-Marketing, E-Word of Mouth, Social Media, Peer-to-Peer Communications, Viral Marketing, Buzz Marketing, Stealth Marketing, Viral Advertising, Viral Videos and other aligned research areas). The findings illustrated that there are various gaps in the literature that require further investigation. Based on the findings, it is evident that the existing frameworks arising from the literature should be enhanced by the adoption of qualitative approaches that explore how general observations respond to contingent factors.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Viral marketing refers to sharing online marketing campaigns among consumers (Kozinets et al., 2010; Leskovec et al., 2007; de Bruyn and Lilien, 2004; Nantel and Sénécal, 2001). It does not encompass campaigns against organisations (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004) but to those experiences where consumers possess the motivation to share a message, which is sometimes clearly commercial and others where it is not (Cho, Jisu, and Faber, 2012; Kontraband, 2006). It has only been just over the last six years that studies of viral marketing (VM) have begun to appear in the top ranked journals (based on the findings of this research 44% of which are not from the marketing field). Given that the research area is so new, there is no thorough summation and/or an evaluation of the extant literature. This paper will address such a gap applying a comprehensive framework for an empirical literature review developed by Berthon, Nairn and Money (2003), the paradigm funnel. They propose that the literature is examined across four categories, moving from empirical observations, to applications of various methods, followed by specific theoretical contributions and finally to the underpinning paradigmatic assumptions within the research. In other words; from the observable to the implicit, where “anomalies on one level of the funnel can potentially be resolved by recourse to a deeper level” (Berthon, Nairn and Money, 2003; pp. 57).

1.1. Short History of Viral Marketing Research

The growth of the Internet has encouraged a focus on VM. The Internet remains the most wide-ranging and significant area of current development in marketing since the television (Chaffey, 2003). The nature of peer-to-peer sharing has resulted in recognition that the future role of online marketing will be an integration of ‘bricks and clicks’ approaches (Strutton, Taylor and Thompson, 2011;

Barwise et al., 2002). Increasingly, the Internet is evolving beyond a restricted channel (a PC connected to a regular telephone line) to utilise a range of high-capacity fixed and mobile networks and devices (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2012). Vials have been using online social networks hosted on these platforms to spread exponentially among consumers (Ho, and Dempsey, 2010). As internet penetration rates have increased and social media has grown, the number of publications has increased accordingly.

In the infancy of a subject, researchers normally approach it from different perspectives (Nairn, Berthon and Money, 2007). The journals, which have accepted publications on viral marketing, are mainly across Advertising, Business and Marketing (ABM) but also from Computing and Engineering (C&E), Communication and Media (C&M), Health and some categorised under others (Table 1). ABM studies have grown into the largest sub-group among the articles. These are further sub-divided into the early and later phases (Table 2). The later phase is chosen from when studies reach double digit in a calendar year when ABM accounted for all the output in the literature, 2007. The early phase is marked by a low number of papers with more in non-marketing related fields of study.

While viral marketing only goes back to 1997, the related subject of word of mouth (WOM) has been a research subject since the late 1960s (Arndt 1967). Such personal communications have been shown to possess greater levels of trust and persuasion than the efforts of marketers (Buttle 1998; Sheth 1971). VM borrows some characteristics from WOM in terms of sender credibility and trust but not necessarily in terms of influence and persuasion (Cheung et al., 2009; Eccleston and Griseri, 2008; Hung and Li; 2007; Shimp, Wood and Smarandescu, 2007; Gruen, Osmonbekov and Czaplowski; 2006; Sun et al., 2006). In this context, it is WOM in electronic form (eWOM) which has common features of conventional WOM but also many unique ones (Breazeale, 2009). During the

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