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Viral Marketing and Its Influence on Customer's Purchasing Decisions: A Quantitative Study in Lebanon

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Abstract

Since the use of social media has increased dramatically allowing marketers to use it as an advertising tool and to communicate with customers frequently, viral marketing has become one of the most important strategies adopted by marketers to build brand awareness and brand engagement that will ultimately affect consumers' buying decisions. So far, limited data is available about viral marketing in the Lebanese market. This research aims to study the effect of viral marketing on the purchasing decisions of customers. A quantitative study was conducted through distributing a survey to a sample of 599 participants. The results showed that most people take their friends' and families' advice when purchasing a product online and they tend to share their product experience on social media and the content they are interested in. Moreover, viral marketing influenced the buying decision of customers through their ability to gather information from other consumers' comments.

Keywords: purchase decision, social media, viral marketing, viral message, word of mouth.

JEL Classification: M31.

1. Introduction

As traditional marketing is becoming less attractive to customers, marketers are shifting towards applying more technological methods to gain customers' trust and arouse their interest. One of the most important innovative techniques used nowadays is viral marketing. With the growth of internet use and extensive use of social media, word-of-mouth communication has changed from being traditional to becoming incorporated in the world of web to improve customer reach (Sharma & Sharma, 2015). Through the use of social media, mainly Facebook and YouTube that are considered as the main communication channels of viral marketing, customers are able to exchange data, posts, images, and experiences, whether

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personal or advertising messages, that will assist them in taking important purchasing decisions (Hamed, 2017; Reichstein & Bruschi, 2019).

As marketers intend to develop their social media strategy, they think of the possible ways to engage their customers as to become active members with the product or brand in order to build loyalty and long-term relationship with their customers (Miller & Lammas, 2015). Moreover, studying the online buying behaviour of customers and the way they retrieve marketing messages and take action should be examined (Haryani & Motwani, 2015). A lot of factors should be considered when setting a viral marketing strategy and one of the factors is the influencer. Influencers also will play a vital role in persuading and spreading of messages in online networks (Miller & Lammas, 2015).

The aim of this paper is to show the impact of viral marketing on consumer buying behaviour in Lebanon and to reveal whether different viral marketing content on social media will affect customers' decisions towards products or brands. Nevertheless, the effect of friends' and families' comments, shares, and likes to a post on consumer decision will be analysed. This research will support the Lebanese database and will give researchers an idea about the Lebanese customer purchasing behaviour and viral marketing impact on them. In addition, this research can be used by marketers who wish to include viral marketing in their strategy.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Literature Review

Traditionally word-of-mouth is known to be a one-to-one communication process through which customers share information regarding products or brands with their families and friends (considered strong bond) and with strangers (considered weak bond). However, nowadays with the evolution of the Web and technology use, this communication process has been transferred to online networks such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, Twitter, etc. and thus got named as electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) (Lopez & Sicilia, 2012).

E-WOM, a non-personal communication process, is considered as a trusted source for customers to gather data and take purchasing decisions as they see it deprived from marketing purposes. That's why e-WOM is shown to affect brand image, engagement, and equity (El Baz, et al., 2018). On the other hand, viral marketing (VM) is a promotional method used by organizations where marketing messages are designed to be widespread from one person to another through encouraging or rewarding them (for instance, like our product or share our post) (Alhelberg, 2018). Other terminologies used for viral marketing include: buzz marketing, referral marketing and electronic or internet word-of-mouth marketing (eWOMM) (Irwansyah, et al., 2019).

As customers take the point of view of people they trust before purchasing products, influencers will play an important role in shaping the customers'

purchasing decisions where influencers have to ability to largely affect the distribution of viral marketing messages (Hirvijarvi, 2017).

Moreover, informative, humour, and emotional content was seen to enhance the customers' motivation to purchase (Hassan, 2018). According to a three-stage (reading, interest, and referral) model analysis studied by Pesher et al. (2013), entertaining content will attract customers to read viral messages, build interest, and refer it to others.

According to Haryani & Motwani (2018), effective viral marketing strategies with clear content, popular brand, and secure entry affect the purchasing decisions of customers. Furthermore, according to a research done by Sawaftah, et al. (2018) on 177 participants, it was shown that viral marketing affects the buying behaviour of consumers more the e-WOM, and age was not proved to be considered a factor of influence. Moreover, a questionnaire conducted by Hamed (2017) on 710 consumers revealed that there is a strong and tight connection between viral marketing and consumer's intention to purchase where viral marketing will enhance the consumers' purchasing actions.

A study by Irwansyah (2019) on 352 individuals showed that viral marketing influenced the purchasing behaviour of customers due to the participants' ability to obtain data from other consumers' comments.

According to Ahmed (2018), his research on 650 individuals indicated that families and friends and viral marketing hugely affect the purchasing decision of consumers. Thus, purchasing decisions are mainly influenced by the spread of word-of-mouth, comments, and effective viral marketing strategies.

Sharma & Sharma (2015) stated that consumers who are interested in a product or information tend to spread it as these same consumers used to receive viral messages from friends and families on social media. Thus, people tend to trust shared posts or messages from friends and families. In addition, purchasing decisions are affected by interesting, informative, creative viral message content especially for adolescence.

3. Research Question

As insufficient data is available in Lebanon regarding studying viral marketing and its effect on buying decisions, this study will answer the below research questions:

Q1: How do customers in Lebanon respond to viral marketing messages/Ads?

Q2: Do comments/likes/shares affect Lebanese customer purchasing attitude?

Q3: What is the type of content that Lebanese customers prefer to share and get motivated to purchase?

4. Research Methods

In order to measure the effect of viral marketing messages posted on social media on the purchasing behaviour of consumers, primary and secondary data was collected, and a quantitative descriptive analysis was conducted. The primary data

included a survey conducted on 599 Lebanese candidates created by Google forms and distributed on social media platforms, mainly Facebook and Instagram. The sampling was non-probability sampling as participants voluntarily chose to fill the form. The survey included demographic information such as age, gender and education level. Moreover, 39 questions were addressed to conclude on consumers' buying behaviour, use of social media, and effect of viral advertisements on purchasing behaviour. The secondary data was collected through academic electronic resources and databases.

5. Findings

5.1. Demographic Information

Of the 599 candidates questioned, 36 % were females and 64 % were males. However, ages were distributed as shown in Figure 1. The majority of those who participated were between 18-25 years, who represent the main population that use social media. In addition, data collected regarding the educational level of the candidates showed that 67 % hold a university bachelor degree, 20 % a master's degree, 7 % a PhD degree, 3 % a secondary school degree, and only 3 % were not educated at all.

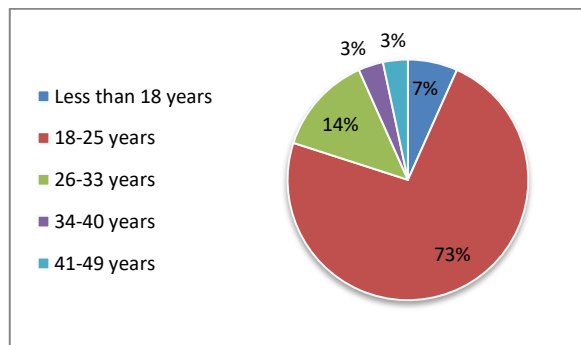


Figure 1. Age distribution
Source: Author's development.

5.2. Viral Marketing/Social Media Use/Purchasing Behaviour Information

i. What social media platforms do you use?

In Lebanon, the main platforms used are Facebook (43.9%), Instagram (53.9%), and YouTube (33.9 %) (Figure 2).

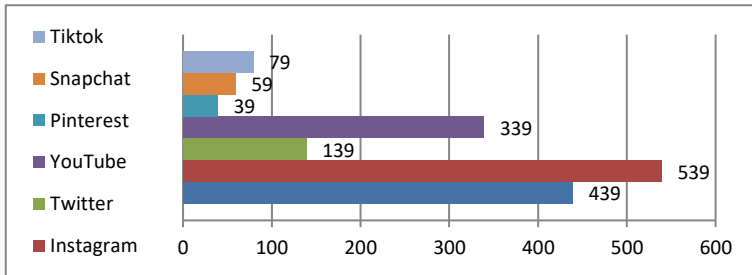


Figure 2. Number of customers who use social media platforms

Source: Author's development.

- ii. *Have you ever decided to purchase a product that was advertised on social media?*

When asked about their purchasing behaviour, consumers were more prone to purchase products when exposed to advertisements on Facebook (70 %), Instagram (67%), YouTube (23%), Snapchat (3%), Pinterest (3%), Twitter (6%), and Tiktok (3%). These results go along with the number of consumers who use each platform (Figure 3).

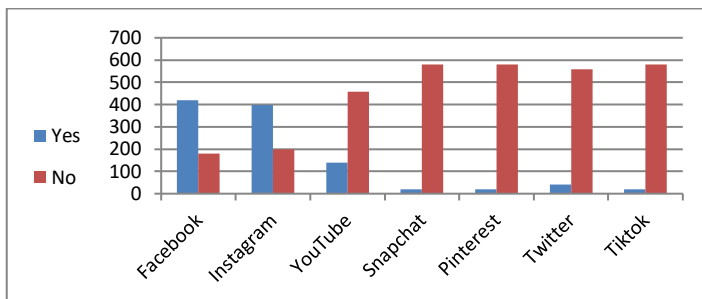


Figure 3. Number of customers who purchase on social media

Source: Author's development.

- iii. *Do you usually read customers' comments before purchasing a product? Do you usually look at the number of shares/likes a post has before purchasing a product?*

It has been shown that 90 % of the consumers are interested in reading customers' comments before purchasing products while only 10 % do not read comments before their purchases. Moreover, the study showed that 70 % of the people take into consideration the likes and shares of posts before purchasing their products, while 30 % do not.

- iv. *If you get interested in a product, do you share the post/ message with your friends or family? Do you get influenced to buy a product or service after hearing/reading about it from friends or family?*

About 80 % of the respondents stated that they share a post or message if they found it interesting, while 20 % do not.

In addition, 80% are convinced to purchase a product or a brand if they received a post or a message from their friends or family, while 20 % are not convinced.

- v. *Do you share a POSITIVE experience with a product with your friends and families on social media? Has reading a POSITIVE customer response or comment about a product changed your decision about buying a product or service?*

Around 60 % of Lebanese customers share positive experiences, while 40 % do not.

On the other hand, 87 % of those who receive positive comments or responses on products will get influenced to purchase the product, while only 13 % do not get influenced.

- vi. *Do you share a NEGATIVE experience with a product with your friends and families on social media? Has reading a NEGATIVE customer response or comment about a product changed your decision about buying a product or service?*

Half of the respondents declared that they share a negative experience and 50 % do not. Furthermore, 83 % changed their purchasing decision when reading negative comments or negative responses from customers, while 17 % were not affected. Consequently, those who share negative experiences tend to affect 83 % of the customers’ purchasing decision. That shows the huge effect negative e-WOM has on customers’ buying behaviour (Figure 4).

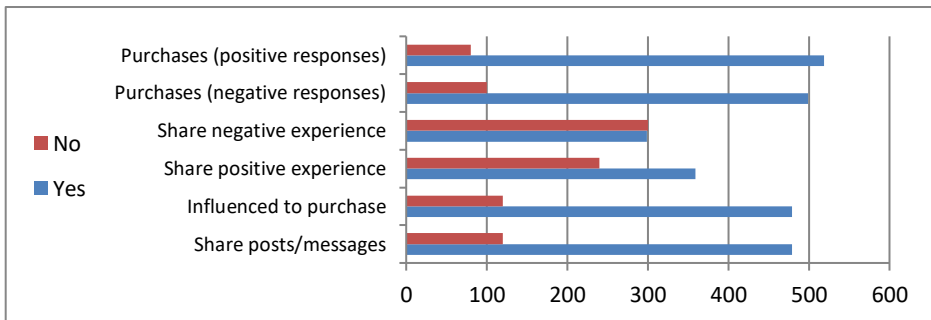


Figure 4. Sharing posts and experience versus the influence to purchase
 Source: Author’s development.

- vii. *Do you purchase a product immediately and spontaneously after seeing an interesting advertisement on social media?*

When questioned whether they purchase a product immediately after being exposed to a viral message, 67 % stated that they do not, while 33 % said they will.

viii. *What type of viral message content do you share?*

As revealed, consumers are more likely to share humour, surprisingly negative, informative, and engaging content. Therefore, for viral marketing messages to spread, it is best to include the above content (Table 1).

Table 1. Measurement of viral content sharing

Viral Content	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Humor	37%	40%	17%	3%	3%
Sad	3%	37%	43%	7%	10%
Negatively Surprising	30%	37%	30%	0%	3%
Positively Surprising	13%	13%	27%	24%	23%
Informative	40%	27%	27%	3%	3%
Popular Song	20%	27%	37%	3%	13%
Celebrity	16%	17%	43%	7%	17%
Engaging	27%	35%	34%	0%	4%

Source: Author's development.

ix. *What type of viral advertisement content will motivate or attract you to purchase a product?*

Accordingly, the most types of content that encourage or convince consumers to purchase are the informative, humour, popular product, and limited offer content. That is why, such content will motivate consumers to take action and purchase if embedded in viral marketing messages (Table 2).

Table 2. Measurement of motivation per viral content

Viral Content	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Humor	32%	29%	32%	7%	0%
Informative	40%	23%	33%	4%	0%
Violent	3%	13%	34%	20%	30%
Sexual/Romantic	10%	7%	30%	33%	20%
Emotional	7%	36%	33%	7%	17%
Fear	7%	10%	36%	27%	20%
Celebrity	7%	33%	27%	20%	13%
Musical	17%	23%	40%	10%	10%
Limited Offer	20%	33%	23%	17%	7%
Popular Product	23%	37%	27%	10%	3%

Source: Author's development.

- x. *How much is your purchasing decision affected if a friend/family shared with you a post or message on social media?*

Consequently, sharing posts and messages on social media especially by our friends and families will actually affect our purchasing decision as 23 % are shown to be strongly affected and 47 % to be affected with the shares friends and families send to them on social media (Figure 5).

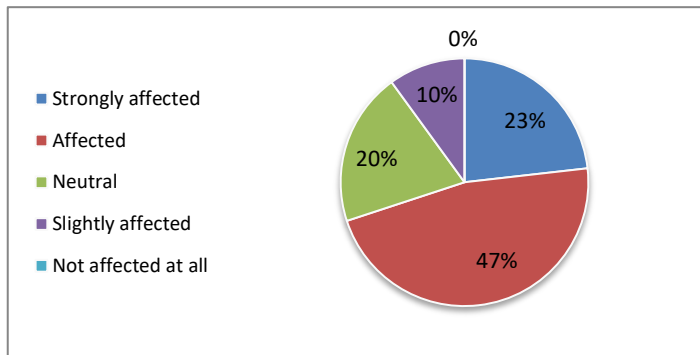


Figure 5. Measurement of purchasing decision influence

Source: Author's development.

- xi. *If a product is viral on social media (its post is spread everywhere), do you try it?*

Viral products on social media will be purchased by 63 % of consumers, while 37 % will not try it.

6. Conclusions

In Lebanon, when deciding on the target market for viral marketing strategy, it was shown that customers between the age of 18 and 33 years spend most of their time surfing Facebook and Instagram. Moreover, the fact that most of those who participated in the survey are educated, this will decrease the research bias making the results more valid as participants are considered more knowledgeable about the use of social media and Ads.

In answering our first and second research question, responding to viral marketing messages can be assessed by marketers through the percentage of likes, shares, and comments. As the research revealed, consumers use less Pinterest, Snapchat, Twitter, and Tiktok, therefore their purchasing behaviour will be less affected as they are less exposed to advertisements on such platforms. However, their decision to purchase after the use of Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube is higher as they adopt such platforms more. In addition, Lebanese customers being disclosed to viral messages will not guarantee customers' purchasing action. The presence of advertisements on social media is triggering customers to purchase

products that they find interesting. However, as the customer likes the product, he/she will turn to take a look at the comments, likes, and shares. Customer satisfaction is shown to be an important factor to the spread of viral messages and it is measured through the number of shares/likes. Thus, the more customers are satisfied, the more positive comments, likes, and shares will support the post or message that will in turn increase the customer willingness to spread positive word-of-mouth, the faster marketers will reach their ultimate goal of action, purchasing. Thus, popular products with high shares/likes are more subject to high purchasing level than those with less popularity. In conclusion, the ability to engage customers will reflect the success of viral marketing programs and will alter the purchasing decisions of customers.

Moreover, in general, companies who work on social media are afraid of the negative feedbacks of customers that will generate a negative e-WOM. According to the data presented, Lebanese people tend to share more positive experience than negative ones on social media, accordingly, giving companies more time to correct any misunderstanding or dissatisfaction before reputation and image is affected.

On the other hand, viral marketing content is very important in persuading customers to engage and purchase. As shown, Lebanese customers mainly get motivated by informative, humour, and popular products content that must be used by marketers to increase the chance of customers' response to viral marketing messages. Thus, responding to the third research question, when occupying a business in Lebanon, informative, humour, and popular content are the best to be used in marketing products with an objective to enhance the purchasing action of customers.

Oppositely, limitations of the study include the age range of participants where still older educated customers who have high purchasing power can be affected by viral messages. In addition, although a definition was stated for participants to understand viral marketing concept, however, there is a possibility that some were not able to differentiate it from word-of-mouth.

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