Literature review:
Examining social media influencer in viral marketing

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Abstract: The concept of viral marketing has been researched for many years but has earned a new meaning with the intense use of social networks, which have become essential part of our daily lives. The use of social media applications provides not only countless possibilities of advertising and commerce, but also instant communication between marketers and consumers. The new types of 'opinion leaders', who spread electronic word of mouth through numerous platforms such as YouTube or Instagram, are labelled 'social media influencers'. In this paper, we explore the relationship between social media influencers, viral marketing, and bridges between related concepts to better understand and improve online marketing strategies. Although many researchers address various concepts on interrelated topics, the questions of origin of virality remain unclear.

Keywords: viral marketing, social networks, influencer marketing, social media influencer, viral content

1 Introduction

The contemporary world is intensely interconnected, and advanced technology plays a crucial role not only in the innovation and digital transformation of businesses but also enables us to share information instantly. In this sense, digitalization refers to digital communication that impacts our social life, since digitization is perceived as 'the transmission of all types of information' (Brennan and Kreiss, 2014; Sevalnev and Tsirin, 2022). Therefore, digitalization has transformed the communication and information processes. Social networks have emerged as an instant medium through which consumers interact both in positive and negative ways (Prapotnik, 2016). Among the most popular social networks are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube (Prapotnik, 2016; Arora et al., 2019, Burgess, 2014). Currently, with the increase in social networks, viral marketing has become essential. Viral marketing benefits from the spread of electronic word of mouth, which further encourages consumers to share marketing information (Hinz et al., 2011). Furthermore, traditional advertising and marketing is said to have changed due to information overload (Bui et al., 2022). Lance and Guy (2013) claim that consumers are increasingly dissatisfied with the excessive amount of advertising information that is simultaneously associated with the increasing number of various advertising channels, among which television is said to be declining in popularity. In that sense, the consumer exercises their power over their choices, and as a result, advertisers, therefore, opt for viral content (Lance and Guy, 2013). A new type of opinion leader known as social media influencers has emerged (Lou and Yuan, 2018; Vrontis et al., 2020; Jin and Ryu, 2019). Influencers on social networks are directly related to viral marketing due to their perceived credibility, trustworthiness, reach, and ability to influence others through social networks (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Kim and Kim, 2021; Jin and Ryu, 2019). Content is shared across various online platforms such as YouTube, Instagram (Arthurs and Drakapoulou, 2018; Lee et al., 2018; Ling et al., 2022).

2 Literature Review

Viral Marketing Vs. Influencer Marketing

Viral marketing refers to the new phenomenon of sharing and spreading marketing information. Furthermore, it is commonly compared to information dissemination that mimics a disease, therefore, referred to as 'viral' (Mohr, 2014). The messages are then delivered through eWOM to encourage 'exponential growth' of information dissemination (Mohr, 2014). The main benefit of viral marketing is its cost effectiveness, time efficiency, and reach (Dingh et al., 2015; Dolan et al., 2019). Despite the common perception of apparently obvious benefits, the authors reveal that 'virality' can be short-

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lived due to numerous unpredictable factors. However, social networks in relation to viral marketing can improve 'brand awareness, encourage discussion about improving products, and recruit new employees' (Ding et al., 2015; Roy 2018). Additionally, to improve viral content, a targeted algorithm can influence customers (Ding et al., 2015). According to Bajpay and Pandey (2012), successful viral marketing requires people with 'high networking potential' who can spread the information quickly.

Related to the activities of influencing others, comes influencer marketing, which directly capitalizes on a significant following of social media influencers to alter the behavior of consumers. However, the main difference is in the lifespan or duration of the 'influence'. While one is rapid, the other requires a deliberate effort to acquire a large following. However, a transition from viral marketing to influencer marketing is possible (Zhang and Huang, 2022). For example, the authors have researched the case of a man whose viral content made him a social media influencer to further boost tourism in his region (Zhang and Hhang, 2022).

Social Media Influencer

Social media influencers (SMI), commonly referred to as opinion leaders, is not a new concept. The terminology of an 'opinion leader' originated from the works of Katz and Lazarfeld in 1948 and in an online environment SMI represents a creator with a large following who can influence and can alter the behavior of their audience, usually through electronic word of mouth (Vrontis et al., 2019). Therefore, social media influencers use eWOM to influence others and increase engagement to further boost sales, promotion, brand awareness and contribute to general outreach (Arora et al., 2019, Milnes, 2016; Zhu et al., 2021; Arora 2019). In addition to that, the authors highlight the importance of 'narrative strategies' for the best result (Zhu et al., 2021). Influencers are undoubtedly important in making content successful for companies. However, reverse benefits also apply, as influencers operate through lucrative endorsements by brands to further promote products based on their perceived credibility (Appelman and Sundar, 2016). For example, Kim and Kim (2021) found that consumers consider posts by influencers on Instagram to be more trustworthy. Chekima et al. (2020) confirm that the trustworthiness and credibility of the source are contributing factors along with attractiveness and similarity contributes to effectiveness of the ads. Additionally, a high number of the following is said to imply perceptions of greater popularity and likeability (Agam, 2017). In this regard, influencers are leveraged in viral marketing due to their ability to spread information based on their large network of followers (Leung et al., 2022). The authors further compare different types of online marketing and point out that viral marketing also needs certain type of agents, referred to as 'seeding agents', who typically promote "firm-generated content" but unlike influencers on social media, seeding agents do not operate through endorsements, commissions, fees, and other incentives. In this sense, influencers are asked to promote through creating a content with relative freedom in creativity (Leung et al., 2022).

Social Media Platforms

The rise of social networks improved the effectiveness of viral marketing by improving speed and spread (Both, 2013). In academic writing, social networks are described as having a characteristic feature that involves 'interactive participation' (Manning, 2014). To specify, the authors point out that a digital platform does not imply social networks, a certain form of participation is needed, for example, the creation of an account. Secondly, interaction with a circle of people is needed to distinguish social media from other media such as television (Manning, 2014). Social media platforms remain a 'significant source of information' where consumers create online communities with their peers through various devices (Zhu et al., 2018). It is suggested that consumers are likely to trust the information shared within their social media groups without any additional verification (Shareef et al., 2020). Although there are many studies on social networks, researchers point out the prevailing challenges of acquiring statistical comparisons across various platforms, as there are additional features and functionalities such as hashtags, bots, 'logs', active vs. inactive users, and more. However, researchers continue to shed light on the topic through numerous methods (Weller, 2016). Generally, YouTube and Instagram continue to expand as it provides participatory culture and user-generated content (Arthurs and Drakapoulou, 2018; Lee et al., 2018). Furthermore, the promising application TikTok is directly associated with the concept of virality due to its short and entertaining content (Ling et al., 2022).

Viral Content

Sharing viral content is a common practice for many, but what makes a content go viral? According to Berger and Milkman (2012), the mechanism lies in psychology, which is simultaneously claimed to have a 'physiological arousal' effect. The authors discuss how emotions play a crucial role in what becomes viral (Berger and Milkman, 2012; Rubin, 2022). Their results demonstrate that positive content evokes high arousal and thus enhances virality of the content as opposed to content with negative, low-driven emotions. In this context, content that induces sadness, anger, or anxiety is less likely to become viral. The surprising or interesting message did not have an altering effect. In that regard, the authors contribute to designing content more effectively for future marketing campaigns (Berger and Milkman, 2012). Libert and Tynski (2013) agree that the success of the content going viral depends on creating rapid emotional excitement and

eliminating heavy branding as it can cause loss of interest. In conclusion, viral content requires an 'emotional rollercoaster' that invokes emotions such as curiosity, astonishment, and interest, among others (Libert and Tynski, 2013; Chiang et al., 2021). Furthermore, it is argued that the willingness of users to participate in the sharing of content on social networks was determined by the perceived 'meaningfulness' of the content (Borges-Tiago et al., 2019). However, some authors claim that 'the most reliable indicator of virality' is the number of followers, claiming that a creator with more than 10,000 followers is likely to go viral, as demonstrated in the case of TikTok videos (Ling et al., 2022). Additionally, videos shot recently and, in close-up, contribute to the virality, unlike the effect of texts and memes, which remain inconclusive (Ling et al., 2022).

Methods

The purpose of the study is to explore topics related to viral marketing, influencers on social networks, and related subtopics. The study is qualitative, uses document analysis and aims to further enhance understanding of concepts. Secondary sources from available research databases were used: books, journal articles, and conference proceedings within research databases such as Web of Science, Google scholar, among others. Document analysis refers to a process that involves reviewing and evaluating documents in paper and electronic form. (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis aims to gain knowledge, understanding, synthesizing data, and producing meanings. Additionally, document analysis is especially useful in qualitative research when accompanied by case studies. However, it can also be used as an independent method (Bowen 2009). The advantages of document analysis are the collection of information, the generation of questions, the comparison of research data, the tracking of changes in the draft and verification of the credibility of the conclusions. (Bowen, 2009).

In the future, complementary case studies will be proposed, as they can cover "the complexity within a case'. (Johansson, 2007). Case studies usually focus on cases that will be described or analysed, which usually means "an individual, a community, a decision-making process, or an event". (Creswell and Poth, 2017). In addition, researchers selected real-life cases to arrive at a precise conclusion. The case study must be framed in terms of time, space, other parameters, and procedures. The main objective of the case study is to deepen understanding. Data analysis can differ, but key themes are considered. The types of case studies vary from single or instrumental case studies to collective or multiple case studies. In the last step, the researcher explains the 'patterns' (Creswell and Poth, 2017).

Limitations

Limitations of document analysis (Bowen, 2019; Yin, 1994):

    a.   Limited in details
    b.   Documents inaccessible
    c.   Bias

Challenges of the case study (Creswell and Poth, 2017):

    a.   Single case study or multi-case study
    b.   Resource limitations
    c.   Case selection
    d.   Cross-case analysis
    e.   Boundaries of the Case

Despite possible errors in overgeneralization within both methods, case studies have especially gained popularity over the past few decades, especially within the circle of social scientists (Feagin et al., 2016). While the main advantages of document analysis are low cost, coverage, availability, and efficiency, to name a few (Bowen, 2009; Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994). In qualitative research, both methods are said to have a desired result, as the qualitative study requires 'robust data collection' (Bowen, 2009).

3 Results

The literature review suggests that viral content is random (Reichstein and Brush, 2019; Ding et al., 2015; Roy, 2018). However, virality can be predicted by the number of factors such as followings, content quality, emotions aroused, and others (Bajpay and Pandey, 2012; Berger and Milkman, 2012; Rubin, 2022). Although academics have explored the endorsement of social media influencers to further promote a product or service, research on merging viral marketing and influencer marketing is scarce due to their similarities despite their differing underlying mechanisms. Different types of online marketing use social media influencers. Viral marketing uses seeding agents who promote brand predesigned content, while social media influencers are asked to create content (Leung et al., 2022). Paths of virality appear to be two-way: 1. The existing following of the influencer makes content go viral, 2. Viral content can be designed through seeding agents in various types of online marketing (Leung et al., 2022). The contribution is two-fold: first, we explore possible links between viral marketing and influencer marketing through social media influencer and virality concepts. Second, with this knowledge, further research can be developed to improve marketing strategies across social media platforms. However, challenges remain due to other unpredictable and unmeasurable factors. More research is needed.

4 Conclusion

Viral marketing and social media influencers accompany each other throughout the academic literature. However, in-depth research, underlying mechanisms, bridges, and gaps exist within interrelated topics. Online marketing strategies, including 'virality' theories or ideas, offer lucrative opportunities for academics and marketers alike, as it can lead to exponential growth, remarkable spread of eWOM to improve product promotion, brand awareness, and consequently increased sales relatively low cost. Despite challenging aspects of measuring, obtaining data, algorithms, and other functionalities of social media platforms, it remains a new and 'hot topic' among academics and marketers alike. More research is required.

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