

Gender Difference in Consumer Perception towards Online Viral Marketing Communication

Sharda Jai Haryani*, Bharti Bharat Motwani**

ABSTRACT

The advent of social networks, online communities, online videos and emails, blogs, forums etc. provide the ability to distribute information faster than ever before. Advancements in communication technology have given rise to the evolution of a new electronic form of word-of-mouth i.e. Viral marketing communication. Viral marketing is a very effective tool available to the marketers today. Due to the extensive use of Internet in sharing information among young adults, marketers should focus on viral marketing as one of the new sources of marketing. The growth in number of internet users has been dramatic ever since it came to existence. The focus of this study is to analyse the effect of gender on the consumer attitude towards the factors that affect online viral marketing techniques. The study was done on primary data collected through self structured questionnaire based on five point Likert Scale. The data was collected from 201 respondents using non-probability judgemental sampling. Independent sample t-test was applied to find the difference between the perception of male and female towards the factors the affect viral marketing. The study will help the marketing managers to understand the behaviour of consumer and tap the right customer in a right way.

Keyword: Consumer Behaviour, Email Marketing, Internet Marketing, Viral Marketing

INTRODUCTION

According to Ridings, Gefean and Arinze (2002) and Bruyn and Lilien, (2008), in the small world concept, the demand for information, the good intention to share the experience or ideas about the products and services, the capability of the customer-to-customer (C2C) communications as the electronic peer-to-peer referrals on Internet, and the potential for getting recommendations from mutual acquaintances have raised a considerable potential for Viral Marketing (VM) which is the effective mixture of the traditional idea called Word of Mouth (WOM). Viral marketing is one of the well-known marketing techniques that leverage electronic personal contacts in pre-existing social networks to achieve marketing objectives (Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006; Godes & Mayzlin 2004; Leskovec, Adamic & Huberman, 2007). It is a self-replicating process in which consumers spread voluntarily product-related messages distinguish viral marketing from other marketing activities that try to deliver the message directly to target consumers (Anderson, 1998).

The diffusion of information from one person to another has been considered as an effective communication channel (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Herr *et al.*, 1991). Due to rapid technology developments, offline-based personal contacts have been extended into various electronic forms through e-mails, instant messengers, blogs, online communities, etc. (Kalika, Charki & Issac, 2008; Watson-Manheim & Bélanger 2007). Especially, the development of recent social computing services such as social networking (e.g., My Space, Facebook), media sharing (e.g., YouTube, Flickr), micro-blog (e.g., Tumblr, Twitter), social mapping (e.g., Dodgeball by Google, Beacon Buddy by Helio), and tagging (e.g., Dgm8, Socialight) enhances the power of personal influence (Lakshmi pathy, 2007; Parameswaran & Whinston, 2007).

Viral marketing is the word today that is used to describe the revolutionary way by which any information proliferates across a million people rapidly within a short period of time. Marketers are now increasingly looking forward to tap this opportunity to deliver any kind of a marketing message because of its ability to make it contagious. Viral marketing is not so easy and uncomplicated. The

* Assistant Professor, Prestige Institute of Management and Research, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India.
E-mail: sharda_haryani@pimrindore.ac.in

** Assistant Professor, Prestige Institute of Management and Research, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India.
E-mail: bharti_motwani@pimrindore.ac.in

complexity of viral marketing campaigns arises from understanding how consumers react or respond to online marketing messages. It is extremely important to tap the right kind of consumer behaviour and attitude to leverage the opportunities available with the marketers. The effectiveness of viral marketing as a promotion relies on the types of social interactions and to identify the most active media in viral marketing campaigns. It is now very important for marketing managers to understand the behaviour of consumer towards online viral marketing. Demographic profile of customer plays a major role in buying decisions and basis of segmenting a market. The focus of this study is to explore the effect of gender on the factors that influence the viral marketing phenomenon. This will help marketers to design their advertisement according to the gender favouritism in an effective way.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Knight (1999), viral marketing is similar to a “digitalised sneeze”, characterised by the release of “millions of tiny particles that can infect others who come into contact with them”. Welker (2002) emphasizes on the contagious power of a virus and suggests that a “virus replicates with geometrically increasing power, doubling with each interaction”. Viral marketing communication is seen as a vital electronic extension of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, which involves the principle of passing on or referring news, information or entertainment to another person. In viral marketing, the communication style used for transmission is usually informal. Messages are spread through different channels including e-mail, chat rooms and discussion forums. They may encompass various types of content ranging from text and images, to Microsoft PowerPoint files, Adobe’s Flash animations, YouTube’s video clips and so on (Woerndl, 2008). Viral marketing is seen as a far more effective, penetrating and faster medium compared to the traditional WOM communication (Helm, 2000). Jurvetson and Draper (1997) also argued that viral marketing makes use of the recommendations by friends and has a snowball effect. It is more powerful than other means of advertising because it conveys an implied endorsement from a known person. For this reason, companies should personalise their referral email so that it clearly shows that it is coming from a friend. The Internet allows significantly more interaction, targeted communication, increased reach and better results evaluation, all at a low cost (Derbaix & Joelle, 2003, Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner, 2010).

Marketing scholars have investigated various influence factors predicting consumers’ participation in eWOM marketing communications. These factors include customer satisfaction (Casalo, Flavia, C. & Guinali, 2008), social capital (Hung and Li, 2007), altruism, social benefits, advice seeking (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremle, 2004), cultural differences (Fong & Burton, 2008), and gender (Awad & Ragowsky, 2008). According to Dobebe, Toleman, and Beverland (2005), successful viral marketing campaigns are comprised of an engaging message that involves imagination, fun and intrigue, encourages ease of use and visibility, targets credible sources, and leverages combinations of technology. While many social marketers fixate on volume metrics (website traffic, hit rates, click-throughs, time spent on-line, postings etc), successful social marketing often depends more on qualitative metrics for desirable signs of the tone, quality and customer benefit of the interaction (Angel & Sexsmith, 2009). These may include: unique visitors, interaction rates, relevant actions taken, conversation size, conversation density, author credibility, content freshness and relevance, audience profiles, unique user reach, and so on (Fisher, 2009). Previous studies have also examined consumers’ demographic characteristics, motivations, and behaviours of receiving, using, and forwarding viral content via the Internet, especially by email (Chiu, Lee & Chen, 2006; Chiu, Lin & Tang, 2005; Gangadharbatla & Lisa, 2007; Huang, Lin & Lin, 2009; Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry & Raman, 2004).

A study by Muzaffar and Kamran (2011) & Tsang, Ho and Liang (2004) revealed that informativeness has an impact on consumers’ attitude towards online advertising. According to Gangadharbatla and Lisa (2008) & Palka, Pousttchi and Wiedemann (2009), entertainment is identified as one of the strongest determinants of digital marketing message acceptance among consumers. Higher source credibility results into more favourable consumers’ response towards the advertisements (Muzaffar & Kamran, 2011). On the basis of the reviewed literature a strong association has been observed between message credibility and its effect on consumers’ response towards the marketing medium. It has found that message clarity was considered as a significant factor to the success of advertising particularly in the context of digital advertising (Taylor, Franke & Bang, 2006) which influence the consumer’s attitudes in the area of viral advertising. By sending incentive-based advertising, advertisers create value to the message, make it active and create

good feeling for customer (Iddris, 2006) and consumers are more willing to accept incentive-based advertising (Tsang *et al.*, 2004). Generally, brand familiarity has been identified, by Alba and Hutchinson (1987), Hoch and Deighton (1989), and Kent and Allen (1994), as the consumers level of direct and indirect experience with products or brands. It is clear that consumers are likely to respond to ads if they are sent from the company that they know or are familiar.

OBJECTIVE

- To empirically analyse the effect of gender on the factors that influences the consumer behaviour towards viral marketing communication.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is exploratory in nature and undertaken to understand the behaviour of people towards marketing over the Internet. The study is mainly based upon primary data collected through a self-structured questionnaire. The sample of the study constituted 201 respondents from Indore city. Non-probability judgemental sampling method was used to select the respondents. The people who use Internet and access accounts on social networking sites were targeted. The questionnaire was designed following a wide review on the viral marketing communication. It was divided into three parts. The first part was based on personal profile of the respondent. The second part was based on the general awareness about the viral marketing techniques. The third part consisted of 24 close ended items based on five point Likert scale (Strongly Agree-5 to Strongly Disagree-1). The inter item correlation was calculated for all the items and found that one of the items was less than 0.196 which is insignificant and thus was not considered in analysis. The remaining 23 items were accepted for the final scale. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach's alpha. As a general rule a coefficient greater than or equal to 0.7 is considered acceptable and is a good indicator of reliability. The Cronbach's Alpha for the final questionnaire was found to be 0.893.

In a pilot study of this questionnaire, on a sample of 110, seven factors were extracted using principal component factor analysis which are Immense Efficacy (% of Var. = 19.693), Supportive Access (% of Var. = 13.17), Professed Security (% of Var. = 10.289), Message Material (% of

Var. = 10.18), Irrepressible (% of Var. = 6.503), Consumer dependency (% of Var. = 6.029) and Escalating Brand (% of Var. = 5.142). The total percent of variance for factors was 71.004 % and the eigen value for each dimension was more than one. The details of these factors are provided in Annexure 1. Assuming these factors to be independent variables and the demographic variable gender as dependent variable, independent samples test (t-test) was applied to the data.

HYPOTHESIS

Gender differences in the degree of access to the Internet existed during the 1990s, but the gaps disappeared by the turn of the twenty-first century and in fact, by 2001 women had more access to the Internet than did men (Clark & Gorski, 2002; Ono & Zavodny, 2003). However, the way men and women use the Internet and behave online seems to differ (Royal, 2005; Wesserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005). According to Ono & Zavodny (2003), men and women may have an equal level of accessibility to the Internet, but women are "less frequent and less intense users of the Internet". Gender has also been identified as a factor influencing information search and other meaningful consumer behaviour constructs by Putrevu (2001). Men and women consumers evaluate messages in advertisements differently. This fashionable paradigm of the differences between men and women are passively accepted by marketing practitioners around the world. Obvious sex differences exist not just because of genetic reasons, but are quite often due to cultural variations (Teather, 1995). Inspired by these studies we formulated the seven hypotheses:

H₀₁ : Gender does not significantly affect the consumer perception on the factor Immense Efficacy of viral marketing communication.

H₀₂: Gender does not significantly affect the consumer perception on the factor Supportive Access of viral marketing communication.

H₀₃: Gender does not significantly affect the consumer perception on the factor Professed Security of viral marketing communication.

H₀₄: Gender does not significantly affect the consumer perception on the factor Message Material of viral marketing communication.

Table 3: Group Statistics

	<i>Gender</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>
Immense Efficacy	Male	106	3.04	.827	.080
	Female	95	2.85	.989	.101
Supportive Access	Male	106	2.95	1.064	.103
	Female	95	2.69	1.011	.104
Professed Security	Male	106	3.21	1.177	.114
	Female	95	2.75	.956	.098
Message Material	Male	106	3.25	.974	.095
	Female	95	2.93	1.064	.109
Irrepressible	Male	106	3.59	1.003	.097
	Female	95	3.00	1.072	.110
Consumer Dependency	Male	106	3.22	1.130	.110
	Female	95	2.61	1.014	.104
Escalating Brand	Male	106	3.76	1.029	.100
	Female	95	3.04	1.071	.110

Table 4: Independent t-test results (EVA=Equal Variance Assumed, EVNA= Equal Variance not Assumed)

<i>Factor F</i>		<i>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</i>		<i>Independent t-test</i>		
		<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	
<i>Immense Efficacy</i>	<i>EVA</i>	7.684	.006	1.444	199	.150
	<i>EVNA</i>			1.430	184.056	.154
Supportive Access	EVA	.033	.857	1.758	199	.080
	EVNA			1.763	198.290	.079
Professed Security	EVA	2.349	.127	3.021	199	.003
	EVNA			3.055	197.159	.003
Message Material	EVA	.078	.781	2.218	199	.028
	EVNA			2.208	191.491	.028
Irrepressible	EVA	.000	.987	4.061	199	.000
	EVNA			4.046	192.988	.000
Consumer Dependency	EVA	.542	.462	3.988	199	.000
	EVNA			4.011	198.999	.000
Escalating Brand	EVA	.070	.792	4.872	199	.000
	EVNA			4.862	194.599	.000

The results of t-test indicated that the sig. values ('p') for hypothesis is 0.154 which is greater than 0.05 and therefore at 5 % level of significance we fail to reject the hypothesis. This shows that gender does not significantly affect the consumer perception on the factor Immense Efficacy of viral marketing communication. The mean value for male

respondents was 3.04 and that for female respondents was 2.85 (see Table 3 group statistics). This indicates that male and female both agreed that viral marketing is a very useful and efficient technique of marketing. Similarly, the results indicated that the sig. values ('p') for hypothesis was greater than 0.05 and therefore we fail to reject the

hypothesis at 5 % level of significance. This shows that gender does not significantly affect the factor supportive access of viral marketing communication. The mean values of male and female respondents were 2.95 and 2.69 respectively. This shows that both male and female have similar views towards the ease of accessibility of viral marketing phenomenon. Contrary to our study Venkatesh and Morris (2000) posit that the influence of perceived ease of use on intentions to utilise IT is stronger for females than for males, suggesting a greater impact of perceived ease of the internet for females than for males. Females potentially have higher levels of computer anxiety and consequently rate the hardness of service and physical environment more highly than males (Igarria, Zinatelli, Cragg & Cavaye, 1997).

The sig. values ('p') for hypothesis was less than 0.05 and therefore we reject the hypothesis at 5 % level of significance. This shows that gender significantly affect the consumer perception on the factor professed security of viral marketing communication. The mean value for male respondents (3.21) was higher than the female respondents (2.75) which indicates that male are more satisfied with the security issues related to online process and they find viral marketing to be trustworthy. Some studies have also argued that males are guided predominantly by controlling tendencies and stress self-assertion, self-efficacy, mastery, and avoidance of insecurity and uncertainty (Chiu *et al.*, 2005).

The sig. values ('p') for hypothesis was less than 0.05 and therefore at 5 % level of significance we reject the hypothesis. This shows that gender significantly affect the consumer perception on the factor Message Material of viral marketing communication. The mean values for male and female were 3.25 and 2.93 respectively indicating that female respondents feel that viral marketing message lacks the message clarity and sufficient information. Marketing managers should provide more and clear information to the consumers. Studies by Haas (1979) and Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran (1991) revealed that females are more subjective, intuitive, comprehensive, and relational processing while men are more logical, analytical, selective, and item-specific processing. Males' selectivity and item specificity predict that they may search less comprehensively than females and focus on certain information sources and topics.

The sig. values ('p') for hypothesis was less than 0.05 and therefore we reject the hypothesis at 5 % level of significance. This shows that gender significantly affect the consumer perception on the factor Irrepressible of viral marketing communication. The mean value of male (3.59) respondent was greater than female (3.00) which proves that men think that this type of marketing can go out of control and sometimes lead to mailbox traffic. Female respondents' behaviour is quite different and they ignore this aspect of viral marketing. Keeping in mind the uncontrollable behaviour of viral marketing, males usually avoid to forward or share the information to their peer groups. The study by Phelps *et al.* (2004) in the context of gender also says that women are more likely to use email to keep in touch with their contacts and to forward email messages to their social group. He estimated that women are more likely to view and forward viral ads to their online contacts.

The sig. values ('p') for hypothesis was less than 0.05 and therefore we reject the hypothesis at 5 % level of significance. This shows that gender significantly affect the consumer perception on factor Consumer Dependency of viral marketing communication. The mean values for male and female were respectively 3.22 and 2.61. It is effective only when the message is shared, forwarded and recommended by others. The previous studies by Haas (1979) and Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran (1991) also specify that when it comes to decision making women use other people's opinions to help make their own decision while men use other people's decisions to help them form their own opinion.

The sig. values ('p') for hypothesis was less than 0.05 and therefore we reject the hypothesis at 5% level of significance. This shows that gender significantly affect the consumer perception on the factor Escalating Brand of viral marketing communication. The mean values for male and female were respectively 3.76 and 3.04 which shows that men strongly support than female that viral marketing helps in the promotion of brands. According to Mitchell and Walsh (2004), males and females want different products and they are likely to have different ways of liking and obtaining these. Gender has an important role in consumer behaviours because the differences between men and women about expectation, want, need, lifestyle etc. reflect to their consumption behaviours (Akturan, 2009, p.66).

CONCLUSION

The study was undertaken to analyse the behaviour of the costumer towards the Internet induced market also called viral marketing phenomenon. A study by Zimmerman (2001) found that 81% of recipients will forward a message to at least one other person and 49% will send it to two or more others. When considering those percentages, it becomes clear how quickly these viral messages spread and therefore why businesses need to harness them to aid their marketing objectives. After understanding the demographic behaviour the manager can execute the viral marketing campaigns effectively and create an instantaneous buzz. This will help them to boost the promotion of brands, products and services. In our study we found that there was difference in the behaviour of males and females towards the factors professed security, message material, irrepressible, consumer dependency, and escalating brand, while there was no difference in the behaviour of males and females towards immense efficacy and supportive access. The proliferation of marketing and advertising, coupled with the onslaught of millions of media channels in today's world, has given cause for consumers to tune out and effectively avoid a great deal of traditional marketing methods. Viral marketing is an attractive solution because it utilises the free endorsement of the individual rather than purchase of mass media to spread the word. Because the distribution model is free, viral can potentially be lower cost and more effective than traditional media. Marketers should utilise viral marketing when the messaging can coincide and support a measurable business goal. The content of message must be customised and sent only after demographic and psychographic segmentation.

LIMITATION

The sample used for the study is relatively small and was limited to a specific geographic region. The study was done by taking the views of the 201 respondents. Self-structured questionnaire was designed for the purpose. Respondents for the survey were taken from the Indore city. The study could have more reliable and would have yield different results if the target demographic was broader than now. Like every study involving human feedback, there is always a big room for bias. Respondents could have provided with false information due to the thought that it might reflect their personality. However, increasing

sample size and respondent from varying demographics will remove this limitation.

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ANNEXURE 1

Table A1: Factor Details

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Factor load</i>	<i>Initial Eigen values</i>	<i>% of variance</i>
Immense Efficacy	Detailed information about the product can be assessed anytime	.783	7.294	19.693
	It saves time	.746		
	It is cost effective	.717		
	Wide range of products can be displayed	.616		
	It is entertaining	.609		
	Relevant information is provided	.607		
Supportive Access	Wide reach ability	.735		13.170
	Rapid diffusion of information	.694		
	No geographical boundaries for promotion	.683		
	Provides easy navigation on web	.653	2.554	
	Enlarged images of products can be assessed.	.582		
Professed Security	VM Can lead association to unauthorized companies	.703		10.289
	The site which gives the information is virus free	.619		
	information is provided by credible sources	.611	2.358	
	VM is trustworthy	.610		
	The information which is downloaded is free of viruses	.500		
Message Material	Sufficient information is provided	.778		10.180
	Message is clearly understood	.743	1.509	
Irrepressible	The communication go out of control	.741	1.204	6.503
	Frequent messages can lead to mail box traffic	.659		
Consumer Dependency	People share the information when some incentives are offered	.805		6.029
	VM is effective only when consumer share it with others	.518	1.090	
Escalating Brand	It is a useful marketing tool for creating brand awareness	.821	1.032	5.142