VIRAL MARKETING SUCCESS SECRETS: OPTIMISING SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract
In today's increasingly competitive digital era, viral marketing through social media has become a key strategy for brands to increase their visibility and engagement. This research uses the literature study method. The results show that the success of viral marketing depends on several key factors: content creativity, a deep understanding of the target audience, good timing, and the ability to utilise the unique features of each social media platform. Major challenges include managing potential crises, maintaining brand consistency, and converting virality into measurable business results. As such, viral marketing through social media offers great potential for brands to achieve exponential growth in awareness and engagement. However, success depends on careful planning, precise execution, and the ability to adapt quickly to the platform's dynamics and ever-changing consumer behaviour. This research provides valuable insights for marketing practitioners and brand managers in designing and executing effective viral marketing strategies in today's digital age.
Keywords: Viral Marketing, Social Media.

Introduction

In the rapidly advancing digital era, social media marketing has become one of the most powerful and efficient marketing strategies. Social media marketing is a marketing strategy that utilises virtual networks to increase brand awareness or reach other marketing targets through the process of spreading messages that copy themselves, similar to the spread of a biological virus (Beilharz, 2021). The concept relies on users to further spread messages or content to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in message exposure and influence. Marketing through social media can happen organically when content becomes popular without a direct campaign from marketers, or it can be deliberate through a well-planned campaign. The advantages of social media marketing lie in its ability to capitalise on the credibility of

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peer to peer communication, reach a wide audience quickly and at relatively low cost, and create high enthusiasm through engaging, emotionally touching or entertaining content (Motoki et al., 2020).

This phenomenon is fuelled by the exponential growth of social media users worldwide. According to recent data from We Are Social and Hootsuite (2023), the number of global social media users has reached 4.76 billion, which is equivalent to 59.4% of the total world population. This figure shows great potential for marketers to reach a wide audience at a relatively low cost (Fletcher, 2020).

Social media marketing, which relies on the rapid and widespread dissemination of messages through virtual networks, has been proven to significantly increase brand awareness, enthusiasm, and even sales. Examples of social media marketing success such as the 'Ice Bucket Challenge' campaign for the ALS Association, which raised more than $115 million in eight weeks, demonstrate the incredible power of this strategy (Wang, 2023).

Thus, viral marketing plays an important role in the modern marketing landscape due to its ability to reach a wide audience quickly and efficiently. In the digital age of information overload, consumers tend to ignore traditional advertising, making viral marketing a valuable tool for attracting attention and creating a voice (Erwin et al., 2023). This strategy harnesses the power of social networks and social psychology, encouraging people to voluntarily share content with their friends and family. This not only increases the reach of the message, but also adds credibility as the recommendation comes from a trusted source (Mann & Kilian, 2024).

In addition, viral marketing can be very cost-effective compared to conventional marketing methods. A successful viral campaign can achieve global reach with a relatively small initial investment. This is especially beneficial for small companies or startups that may not have a large marketing budget (Akdevelioglu & Venkatesh, 2022). Viral marketing also allows for higher interaction and engagement with the target audience, which can lead to increased brand awareness, customer loyalty, and ultimately, sales. In a highly competitive business landscape, the ability to create viral campaigns can be a significant competitive advantage (Kreutzer, 2021).

However, despite the enormous potential, many companies and marketers still struggle with creating and executing successful viral campaigns. According to a study by Jonah Berger and Katherine L. Milkman (2012), only about 1% of online content actually goes viral. This suggests that creating viral content is not an easy task and requires a deep understanding of the factors that influence virality (Zerres, 2024).

Social media, as the main platform for viral content dissemination, has unique characteristics and dynamics. Each platform, such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or Twitter, has different algorithms, user demographics, and features. Marketers need to understand how to optimise each platform to maximise the viral potential of their content (Moriuchi, 2021).

On the other hand, the dynamics of social media are becoming more unpredictable by the day. New features appear quickly and changes to the algorithm system on various platforms can appear in a matter of hours, forcing marketers to always be responsive to keep up with the times. A clear example is the emergence of TikTok, which in a short time transformed into a major arena for the production and consumption of viral content (Drechsler, 2024).

Meanwhile, marketing through viral content comes with its own risks. Misdirected or controversial promotions can easily backfire and damage a brand's reputation. The case of Pepsi through a campaign with Kendall Jenner, which was flooded with criticism, explains how important it is to understand socio-cultural sensitivities in designing fast-sharing campaigns (Decker, 2024).

Therefore, this study aims to uncover the secrets behind successful viral content marketing with a focus on social media optimisation. Through an in-depth literature review, this research will analyse the key factors, effective strategies, etc. in creating and disseminating infectious content across various social networking platforms.

Research Methods

In this study, researchers used the literature research method, which is a research approach that involves collecting, analysing, and presenting information from various written sources relevant to the research topic. This method generally involves reading, recording, and processing research materials from sources such as books, journals, and scientific papers. (Suprayogo & Tobroni, 2003); (Suparlan, 2014).

Results and Discussion
Viral Marketing

Viral marketing, or word-of-mouth marketing, is a marketing strategy created to encourage people to spread marketing messages quickly and widely, similar to the spread of a virus in a biological context. The concept utilises natural social networks to increase brand awareness or achieve other marketing goals through a self-copying process of information dissemination (Zerres, 2024). The essence of viral marketing is to create content that is so interesting, funny or useful that people are compelled to voluntarily share it with their friends, family and networks, who will in turn share it again, creating a 'viral' effect (Baines et al., 2022).

Viral marketing can occur naturally when content becomes popular without direct intervention from marketers, or it can be planned as part of a deliberate marketing strategy. In the digital age, viral marketing often utilises social media, email and video sharing platforms to accelerate the spread of messages. The success of viral campaigns often depends on a deep understanding of the psychology of the target audience, good timing, and the ability to capitalise on hot trends or issues (Stoychev, 2020). Although difficult to predict and control, when successful, viral marketing can

provide wide exposure at a relatively low cost compared to traditional marketing methods (Majid & Pebrianggara, 2024).

The development of word-of-mouth marketing has undergone a significant transformation since its emergence in the 1990s. In the beginning, word-of-mouth marketing relied more on manual email distribution and in-person communication. However, with the advent of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, as well as video-sharing sites such as YouTube, word-of-mouth marketing has undergone a vast revolution. The development of smartphone technology and improved internet connectivity have also accelerated the spread of viral content (Jackson, 2020). Today, word-of-mouth marketing relies not only on text and images, but also utilises short videos, memes, challenges and even augmented reality (AR) to create a more interactive and shareable experience. The increasingly sophisticated algorithms of social media platforms also play a role in accelerating the spread of viral content, while data analytics allow marketers to track and optimise the performance of their campaigns in real time. These developments have made word-of-mouth marketing one of the essential strategies in modern digital marketing, with unprecedented potential for global reach (Nguyen et al., 2020).

Word-of-mouth marketing has several key characteristics that set it apart from other forms of marketing. Firstly, it is exponential in its spread, where one person shares to many, who then share again, creating a snowball effect. Second, word-of-mouth marketing relies heavily on interesting, entertaining, or useful content, which encourages people to share it voluntarily (Mulcahy et al., 2024). Third, it leverages existing social networks, both online and offline. Fourth, word-of-mouth marketing often has a strong emotional element, triggering reactions such as laughter, admiration, and even controversy. Fifth, it usually has low barriers to participation and sharing, making it easy for people to get involved. Sixth, word-of-mouth marketing often capitalises on trends or topical issues. Seventh, while it can be planned, the success of word-of-mouth marketing is difficult to predict and often depends on timing and luck. Finally, word-of-mouth marketing usually has the potential for a very wide reach at a relatively low cost compared to conventional marketing methods (Horster, 2022).

Thus, viral marketing is a unique and powerful marketing strategy in today's digital age. Its development has undergone a major transformation from its original simple form to a complex and diverse approach, fuelled by technological advancements and social media platforms. Its distinctive characteristics, such as exponential spread, reliance on attention-grabbing content, utilisation of social networks, and potential for wide reach at relatively low cost, make it a highly effective tool in modern marketing.

While viral marketing offers great potential to reach a global audience quickly, its success is not always predictable and often depends on a variety of factors, including creativity, timing, and resonance with the target audience. Marketers who successfully leverage viral marketing must understand the dynamics of digital platforms, the latest

trends and online consumer behaviour to create campaigns that truly 'go viral' and make a positive impact on their brand.

With the continued development of technology and changes in consumer behaviour, viral marketing will likely continue to evolve, offering new opportunities and challenges for marketers in the future. Therefore, adaptability and creativity will remain key in effectively harnessing the power of viral marketing.

Social Media

Social media can be defined as digital platforms or interactive applications that allow users to create, share, and interact with content and connect with others online. These platforms have become an integral part of modern life, changing the way we communicate, share information, and even conduct business (Aktavika & Prapanca, 2023). Social media have key characteristics of interaction, accessibility, and the ability to reach a global audience quickly and easily. They also often offer features that allow customisation, giving users the opportunity to tailor their experience to personal preferences and interests (Zulqarnain et al., 2023).

The types of social media vary widely, each having a unique focus and features. Some of the main categories include: (1) Social networks such as Facebook and LinkedIn, which focus on interpersonal relationships and business networking; (2) Media-sharing platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, which emphasise visual and video content; (3) Micro-blogging sites such as Twitter, which allow short, quick posts; (4) Online discussion forums such as Reddit, where users can talk about specialised topics; (5) Blogging platforms such as Medium or Tumblr, which allow users to publish longer content; (6) Instant messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram, which focus on personal or group communication; and (7) Location-based platforms such as Foursquare, which connect users based on their geographic location. Each of these types of social media has its own uses and target audiences, providing a variety of options for individuals and businesses to engage in the digital environment (Nori, 2020).

Social media plays a central role in modern marketing, providing a dynamic and effective platform to engage and interact with target audiences. Its key functions include: increasing brand awareness through broad, consistent exposure; facilitating customer engagement through direct interaction, commenting and content sharing; providing a channel for responsive customer service; enabling more specific marketing through sophisticated audience segmentation features; driving traffic to company websites; improving SEO through social signals; facilitating influencer marketing to expand reach and brand trust; providing a platform for viral marketing campaigns; enabling the collection of valuable customer data for insights and personification; and offering a direct sales channel through integrated e-commerce features (Almrafee, 2023). With its ability to reach a global audience at a relatively low cost, social media has become a critical component of digital marketing strategies, enabling businesses of all

sizes to compete and grow in an increasingly digitally connected marketplace (Sabillah et al., 2022).

Recent developments in social media usage demonstrate a significant shift in platform user preferences and facilities. Some prominent trends include: an increase in the popularity of short video content, as seen on TikTok and Instagram Reels; a greater focus on privacy and data security, with platforms enhancing user protection features; the growth of social e-commerce, where social media is increasingly integrated with in-person shopping options; the increased use of augmented (AR) and virtual (VR) reality to create more immersive experiences; the growth of small communities and micro-communities centred on special interests; the increasing use of chatbots and AI for customer service and engagement; the popularity of ephemeral or ephemeral content such as Stories; an increased focus on mental health and digital wellbeing, with platforms adding features to limit time of use; the growth of live streaming and real-time interactions; and the increased use of social media for activism and social movements (Morton, 2020). These developments reflect the continued evolution of social media in response to changing user needs and technological advances, shaping the way we interact, share information and engage with the digital world.

Key Factors for Viral Marketing Success

Word-of-mouth marketing has become a very powerful strategy in the digital age, allowing messages or content to spread quickly through online social networks. The first essential for successful word-of-mouth marketing is the creativity and distinctiveness of the content (Sweeney & Phillips, 2024). Content that ignites strong emotions, entertains, surprises or provides significant value is more likely to be shared. This could be a funny video, an informative infographic, or an inspiring story. The quality of the content should be as high as possible to grab the audience's attention amidst the flood of online information, and interesting enough to encourage them to share it with others (Tuten & Hanlon, 2022).

The second factor is a deep understanding of the target audience and the platforms they use. Successful word-of-mouth campaigns require knowledge of the audience's preferences, behaviours, and motivations for sharing content. This includes understanding which platforms are most frequently used by the target audience, the best time to upload content, and the type of content they are most likely to share. Additionally, utilising influencers or thought leaders within the target community can significantly increase the reach and credibility of the campaign (Jansen et al., 2021).

Finally, the ease of sharing and accessibility of content is another key factor. Content should be easy to share with a single click, and it should be accessible across multiple devices and platforms. Optimisation for mobile devices is especially important, given that most social network users access the platform through mobile devices (Agustine & Sinduwiatmo, 2023). In addition, good timing is also important; launching a

campaign at the right moment, perhaps in conjunction with a trend or current event, can increase the chances of virality. It is also important to have a robust technical infrastructure in place to handle the surge in traffic should the campaign successfully go viral. By considering and optimising these factors, marketers can increase their likelihood of creating a successful word-of-mouth campaign and achieving significant reach and engagement (Charlesworth, 2022).

Strategies to Optimise Social Media for Viral Marketing

Utilising social media for viral marketing requires a strategic and well-planned integrated approach. The first step is to choose the right social media platform according to the target audience and the type of content to be promoted. For example, Instagram and TikTok are very effective for visual content and short videos, while LinkedIn is more suitable for corporate and B2B content (Erdoğan, 2023). After that, it is important to understand the algorithms and unique features of each platform to maximise visibility and engagement levels. This includes using relevant hashtags, utilising features such as Stories or Reels, as well as optimising the timing of uploads for maximum reach (Purwanto et al., 2023).

Content with viral potential should have elements that can trigger strong emotions or reactions from the audience. This can be humour, surprise, inspiration, even controversy (if appropriate to the brand). It is important to create content that is not only engaging but also easy to share and understand in a short period of time (Rimbasari et al., 2023). Informational infographics, short entertainment videos, or interactive challenges are often popular choices for viral content. Moreover, integrating storytelling elements can make the content more engaging and memorable, increasing the likelihood of audiences sharing it (Andina et al., 2024).

Collaboration with other influencers or brands can significantly increase the reach and viral potential of a social media campaign. Influencer marketing not only extends the reach to new audiences but also adds credibility and authenticity to brand messages (Solmecke, 2024). It is important to select influencers according to the brand's values as well as to have a following that is relevant to the target audience. In addition, encouraging user-generated content through contests or challenges can create an organic viral effect, as users tend to share content they create themselves (Parker & Brennan, 2020).

Finally, the use of analytics and data is essential in optimising viral marketing strategies on social media. Monitoring metrics such as engagement rate, reach, spread and conversions can provide valuable insights into what works and what needs to be improved. A/B testing for different campaign elements, such as titles, visuals, or call-to-actions, can help identify the most effective formats (Drechsler, 2024). It is also important to be responsive to ongoing trends and conversations on social media, and quickly adapt strategies to capitalise on momentum. With a measured and adaptive

approach, brands can continuously optimise their social media strategy to increase the chances of creating successful viral campaigns and achieving marketing goals (Abdul-Talib & Arshad, 2022).

Challenges and Risks in Viral Marketing

Viral marketing has great potential to bring in great results, but it also comes with significant challenges and risks. One of the main obstacles is the high level of uncertainty. There is no exact formula that can be relied upon to create contagious content, and even the best campaigns may not achieve the desired momentum (Brennan et al., 2020). Factors such as the right timing, current trends, and complex social dynamics can influence whether content will go viral or not. Moreover, the speed of information flow in the digital age is a double-edged sword. While the benefits are felt when content is welcomed, a small mistake or misunderstanding has the potential to quickly turn into a storm of uncontrollable public relations (Fenton et al., 2020).

Another risk that needs to be considered is the possibility of brand image disruption. Attempts to create shocking or controversial content to attract attention may inadvertently cross the line of ethics and social sensitivity, causing a negative public backlash that not only derails the campaign but also damages the overall brand image. Furthermore, successful viral campaigns that do not align with core values or long-term brand positioning can confuse consumers and weaken brand identity (Zulfiqar et al., 2022).

Technical and logistical challenges should not be overlooked in viral marketing. If a campaign is highly contagious, brands must be prepared for a sudden surge of traffic to their website or social media platforms. Inadequate infrastructure can potentially lead to failure or performance degradation, which in turn reduces the effectiveness of the campaign and can even damage consumer perception (Haryanto et al., 2022). Furthermore, measuring the ROI of viral campaigns is often difficult. While metrics such as impressions, shares and opt-ins are easy to measure, translating them into tangible business impact (e.g. increased sales or brand loyalty) often requires more in-depth and complex analysis (Schmidt et al., 2024).

A further challenge is maintaining momentum after a campaign has gone viral. Often brands experience a brief surge in popularity after their content becomes phenomenal, but struggle to maintain relevance and engagement over the long term (Schacht, 2024). This raises the question of how to integrate strategies that become phenomenal into a broader, sustainable marketing strategy. In addition, there is a risk of saturation in the market. As more brands attempt to create viral content, consumers may become more sceptical or even apathetic towards such efforts, ultimately reducing the effectiveness of viral marketing strategies as a whole (Faust, 2024).

Legal and regulatory aspects also need to be considered in viral marketing. With the rapid and widespread dissemination of content, brands need to be very careful not

to violate copyright, privacy, or advertising regulations that apply in various jurisdictions (Lehmann, 2024). Campaigns that involve content from users, for example, must have clear mechanisms in place to deal with potential copyright infringement or inappropriate content. In addition, with increasing attention to data privacy and regulations such as GDPR, brands should ensure that their data collection and use practices in their viral campaigns are compliant with applicable standards and regulations (Bruhn & Hadwich, 2024).

In conclusion, while viral marketing offers great potential to reach a wide audience at a relatively low cost, it also comes with a complex set of challenges and risks. Brands looking to harness the power of viral marketing should prepare thoroughly, consider all possible scenarios, and have a solid contingency plan in place. It is important to realise that virality is not an end in itself, but rather a tool to achieve larger marketing goals. Therefore, an effective viral marketing strategy should be well integrated into the overall marketing strategy, in line with the brand values, and designed not only to create a momentary buzz, but also to build long-term relationships with consumers. With a thoughtful, planned and holistic approach, brands can harness the power of viral marketing while minimising the risks, creating campaigns that not only attract attention but also deliver real value to the brand and its consumers.

Conclusion

Marketing through social media has become a powerful strategy in this digital age. The success of a campaign is largely determined by the ability to create content that is not only engaging and shared further, but also authentic and relevant to the target audience. It is important to understand the dynamics of each platform, optimise the timing and frequency of posts, and leverage its unique features to increase engagement. Moreover, collaborating with influencers and pushing user-generated content can extend the reach and credibility of the campaign.

However, keep in mind that viral marketing is not free of risks and challenges. Brands must be prepared for possible protests, manage crises quickly and effectively, and ensure consistency of messages with brand values. In addition, maintaining momentum after going viral and integrating viral strategies into long-term strategies is often overlooked. With careful planning, careful execution, and quick adaptability, viral marketing can be a highly effective tool to increase brand awareness, engagement, and ultimately, business growth in a competitive digital environment.

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