



## **DOES VIRAL MARKETING CREATE BRAND AWARENESS? AN EXPLORATORY STUDY WITH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

*O marketing viral cria consciência da marca?  
Um estudo exploratório com estudantes universitários*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Viral Marketing has attracted the attention of many schoolers and people from the field of marketing because of the broad reach the message it shares can get. Recent studies investigated what leads people to share viral content and which content is most likely to become viral. However, there is no proved correlation between viralization and brand awareness generating. Considering that the main purpose of any Marketing is make the target audience identify and remember a brand, the current study investigated through an exploratory survey whether the videos that went viral on 2016 were able to generate brand awareness in a group of students of the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo-PUC / SP. The results showed limited impact on the creation of brand awareness, because of previous experience of the public in recognition of the brand displayed on the video. In addition to the results the study also contributes by questioning the content displayed in viral videos and shows how the time of exposure of a brand on a video influences directly in the creation of brand awareness.

**Keywords:** Viral Marketing; Brand Awareness; Viralization.

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## O MARKETING VIRAL CRIA CONSCIÊNCIA DA MARCA? UM ESTUDO EXPLORATÓRIO COM ESTUDANTES UNIVERSITÁRIOS

*Does viral marketing create brand awareness?*

*An exploratory study with university students*

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### RESUMO

O marketing viral atraiu a atenção de muitos estudantes e pessoas da área de marketing devido ao amplo alcance que a mensagem que compartilha pode ter. Estudos recentes investigaram o que leva as pessoas a compartilhar conteúdo viral e qual conteúdo tem maior probabilidade de se tornar viral. No entanto, não há correlação comprovada entre viralização e geração de conhecimento da marca. Considerando que o principal objetivo de qualquer Marketing é fazer com que o público-alvo identifique e se lembre de uma marca, o presente estudo investigou por meio de uma pesquisa exploratória se os vídeos que se viraram em 2016 foram capazes de gerar notoriedade de marca em um grupo de alunos da Pontifícia Igreja Católica Universidade de São Paulo-PUC / SP. Os resultados mostraram impacto limitado na criação de notoriedade da marca, devido à experiência anterior do público em reconhecimento da marca apresentada no vídeo. Além dos resultados, o estudo também contribuiu questionando o conteúdo veiculado nos vídeos virais e mostra como o tempo de exposição de uma marca em um vídeo influencia diretamente na criação do conhecimento da marca.

**Palavras-chave:** Marketing Viral; Conscientização da marca; Viralização.

## INTRODUCTION

The term "viral marketing" has existed for more than two decades, but it only became famous in digital media due its use on a previously established social media, that aims the contribution to the dissemination and sharing of information using word-of-mouth (WOM), or *boca a boca* in Portuguese (Almeida, Costa, Coelho and Scalco, 2016). The seek for viral content got a lot of attention from companies that, instead of spending money on media services, allocated efforts and resources to use free media in which customers are active as the main channel of communication (Corcoran, 2009<sup>1</sup>).

As far as *viralization* and content sharing are concerned, recent studies have investigated user's behavior when sharing online content, the impact of different subjects shared influences how viral it will get, creating different values of those subjects to companies interested in Brand Awareness (Berger, Akpınar, 2017; Dafonte-Gómez, 2014; Almeida et al., 2016; Berger, Milkman, 2012; Nikolinakou e King, 2018; Tellis et al., 2019).

Those studies brought meaningful contributions to the academic and managerial field by identifying that:

- (i) videos that generate a type of positive reaction are more likely to become viral compared to videos that induce negative reactions (Nikolinakou and King, and Milkman, 2012);
- (ii) videos that have as their only goal to present a particular brand have more credibility among the audience (Berger and Akpınar, 2017) and
- (iii) the presence of a brand in videos with emotional content does not reduce the amount of share (Tellis et al., 2019).

However, despite the contributions mentioned, there are still dimensions that weren't explored that identify how viral videos are contributing to the generation of brand awareness in the audience reached by its message. Tellis et al. (2019) describes a literature review that shows that only 2 articles which analyzed video sharing have some kind of analysis regarding the presence of the brand on a video, but none evaluated how the presence of the brand on a video has created a memorable impact of the brand to the costumers.

Understanding the importance of brand awareness is primordial because viral videos are not only reaching a large number of people, but are also ensuring that the people who view it have a relation to what they saw and recognize the brand or the company who created it. Tariq et al. (Bloch, Sherrell and Ridgway, 1986), describes that a customer, when having knowledge about a particular brand or company increased, tends to speed up purchasing decision process.

In order to reduce this discrepancies, the study aims to improve viral marketing, by understanding how these viral videos contribute on the creation of brand awareness on an specific public. Our studie focus on exploratory research so that future studies can be done and get even deeper in the relation between viral videos and brand awareness.

In general, this study contributes to marketing research in two ways: (1) when evaluating whether branded videos create brand awareness; (2) by evaluating how the time spend on the brand or video content influences the generation of brand awareness.

## 1. VIRAL MARKETING

Ogden e Crescitelli (2007) define viral marketing as a new style of marketing raised during Modern Communication of Marketing WOM, with the difference that it uses internet for propagation of message such as e-

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<sup>1</sup> Corcoran, Sean (2009), "Defining Earned, Owned and Paid Media". Sean Corcoran's Blog (December 16). Recuperado em 15 de abril de 2019, de [http://blogs.forrester.com/interactive\\_marketing/2009/12/defining-earned-owned-and-aidmedia.html](http://blogs.forrester.com/interactive_marketing/2009/12/defining-earned-owned-and-aidmedia.html).>

mail, video, audio, games, websites, social networks, photographs or documents, which, due to its quick transmission, can be compared to a contagious virus, using the means mentioned above.

The term Viral Marketing is a reinterpretation of the English expression “word of mouth”, created in 1997 (Knight, 1999). Sun et al. (2006) define viral marketing as a tool for establishing relations between communities, but online. The *Word of Mouth Marketing Association* (WOMMA) defines viral marketing as “the creation of entertainment or informational messages made to be passed on in a broader way, usually through electronic means or email” (Freundt, 2012).

Regardless the definitions for viral marketing, Berger and Akpınar (2017), based on Berger (2014), describe that the success of any viral marketing action depends on two factors. The first factor is people's willingness to speak or share a particular marketing action, but to do so, one must investigate why people share some things over others. The second factor is that companies need to generate value for brands that are being used as advertising.

Berger and Milkman (2012) investigated what makes certain contents viral. Evaluating New York Times articles published over three months, the authors concluded that positive content is most likely to become viral than negative one. But this relation is more complex than it looks, since the authors have found that content that generates high positive excitement (eg, fascination or glamor) or negative (eg anger or nervousness) is more likely to be shared than the ones that generate low excitement (for example, sadness).

Teixeira (2012) believes that, before attempting to make something go viral, a campaign must reach the goal of being seen. In addition, the author identifies factors that can positively impact on how viral a campaign can get, for example, the inclusion of emotional content already at the beginning of the subject and the creation of a roller coaster of emotions throughout the advertisement, in order to establish an emotional experience that goes up and down as a way to keep the public's attention.

Dafonte-Gómez (2014) evaluated a sample from 25 videos available on Unruly Media digital platform between 2006 and 2013 in order to identify the elements that stimulate the sharing of a particular video. The authors concluded that all those videos with emotional content, which contained elements such as surprise and joy, were more famous than the others.

Berger and Akpınar (2017) propose a categorization between the different types of advertisements, differentiating informational appeal from advertisements with emotional appeal. Advertisements with informative content are those where (i) there is greater emphasis on the product and the brand; (ii) the product and brand are the main focus; (iii) there is greater appeal in the characteristics and specificities of the product; (iv) the technical product information is provided. On the other hand, advertisements with emotional content are divided into Partially Emotional, where, in the course of advertising: (i) there is less emphasis on product and brand, (ii) the product and the brand are shown discreetly, as a complement to the message; (iii) there is musical, cinematographic, visual effects and / or famous artists appeal, and, (iv) there is no reference to the technical information of the advertisement. The other one is the Fully Emotional product, where: (i) there is medium / great emphasis on the product and the brand, (ii) the product and the brand are inserted with greater intonation as the central theme of the message; (iii) there are also musical, cinematographic, visual effects and / or famous artists appeals, but (iv) there is some references to technical information. The authors studied how these different types of content would impact *viralization* and two main conclusions were obtained. The first conclusion is that videos with emotional content are more shared than videos with too much information. The second conclusion is that the presence of the brand in the emotional videos does not negatively impact its fame. Thus, from the managerial point of view, the authors suggested that companies should focus on creating videos with a meaningful presence of the brand.

Tellis et al. (2019) deepened the discussion on how the brand influences the amount of shares. The authors evaluated whether the presence of the brand at the beginning, middle, end or even absence of it would impact the results. In conclusion, it was identified that the presence of the brand at the end of the video is significantly better than the other options.

It is noticed that there is an Evolution on the number of dimensions explored regarding viral videos. At the beginning the focus was what motivated the user to share a video, and currently there are articles analyzing how the moment of appearance of the brand will impact on the number of shares. However, as already mentioned

above, there is no research that evaluates how viral videos have contributed to the creation and intensification of brand awareness.

## 2. AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

In this article, there was a research on students from PUC / SP. University students were chosen based on an article published by Berger and Akpınar (2017), in which a similar research was made on viral marketing with students from other universities in other countries. College students are the main users of many platforms from the Internet, therefore they are an essential audience to be evaluated. We based the exploration of labor in a very similar age profile, because we sought for the equalization of at least one of the variables among all the others present on the experiment, such as gender, race and socioeconomic level.

The foundations of the research involved a presentation of viral videos to the audience so that they could classify them as informational or emotional, identify the presence or absence of the brand and be able to tell which company is behind the video. The measurement of brand awareness took place through a numerical counting of how many could identify the brand involved in the advertisement.

For each of the interviewees a file was delivered, containing a table identifying the advertisements in sequential order, plus two questions. The first question asked the student to classify the video as emotional or informative and the second one asked the interviewee to write the name of the brand or product related to each video.

Regarding the videos presented to the students, the similarities of the sources used were considered, just as Berger and Akpınar (2017) did, the initial proposal involved viral videos from the site *Unruly* (unruly.co), that is considered the most relevant platform in this field that evaluates and tracks video sharing. According to Berger (2016), since 2006 *Unruly* had mapped over 329 billion videos. However, the search for this content was not available, since *Unruly* no longer offers this service, making it impossible to obtain these advertisements.

As an alternative to overcome this obstacle, it was discovered, on the same website, an extensive list of other places where the main viral videos could be found, which were: *Campaign*, *the IAB*, *The Guardian*, *AdWeek*, *Werben & Verkaufen*, *Horizont*, *Contagious Magazine*, *MumbrellaAustralia* and *Communicate*.

An individual research was made on each of those places, and on the *AdWeek*<sup>2</sup> website a 2016 report was found with the 20 most famous videos of that year. The choice of videos from a previous year had the purpose to minimize the impact of the seasonality of its content. In addition, the annual analysis brings a benefit that is the consideration of all stages of *viralization*, that is, the beginning, apex and decline, at local, regional and global level.

Ten videos were chosen from different countries spread around the world. The average time of the twenty videos is 2 minutes and 49 seconds. Regarding the number of shares, it varied between 544,585 and 1,949,387.

After defining the methodology and the data source used for the research, it was possible to collect results, on the morning of May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019, at Campus Monte Alegre, PUC / SP.

Before the experiment began, the students were given a brief explanation of the specialized literature, about how to define the informational and emotional contents, mentioning characteristics that distinguish each one of them and the importance of this study. Finally, the students were asked to answer the questions individually, avoiding the interference of a colleague.

After that, the 10 videos were presented in sequence and, at the end of each one, the two questions in the questionnaire were answered.

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<sup>2</sup> Adweek (2016). The 20 Most Viral Ads of 2016. Disponível em: <<https://www.adweek.com/creativity/20-most-viral-ads-2016-174885/>>

### 3. PRELIMINARY RESULTS

After the students took part of the research, each participant's answer was collected for evaluation and analysis. In total, 33 students participated in this activity. Considering that 10 advertisements were designed, a total of 330 responses were collected, which were analyzed from a quantitative and qualitative point of view. The first evaluation aimed to understand the distribution of the 330 responses between informational and emotional content.

The results showed that, out of the 330 evaluations carried out, 321 indicated that all 10 videos presented emotional content. This agrees with what other authors (Tucker, 2015 and Berger, 2014) have already found out about the fact that companies have prioritized the creation of videos with emotional rather than informative content, seeking for more and further reach.

Then, based on a series of emotional data a brand awareness assessment was made, questioning if the content that is fully emotional provides a more powerful generation of brand awareness than the partially emotional.

According to Keller (1993), a brand can be recognized by its name, term, sign, design or a combination of all these factors, creating Brand Knowledge, which is brand recognition through these symbols. The importance for brand recognition in the customer memory has been studied for many years to identify its effects on one's final decision (Alba, 1991).

The results are described in Table 1. It is observed that approximately 62% of the evaluations (n = 199) indicate the contents of the advertisements as fully emotional. In addition, approximately 38% (n = 122) of the evaluations classified them as partially emotional. Regarding the generation of brand awareness, it is observed that, for most videos (7 out of 10 videos), over 50% of all students recognized the brands behind it (RB), meaning that most videos are functional. The lack of other studies in literature has limited the comparison meaning that 50% index can be considered both good and bad index.

**Table 1- Time of exposure of a brand in relation to the total time of the advertising**

Ranking	Advertising	T.T.	T.E.B.	R.B.	E.R.P
10°	Mc'Donalds	01:01''	00:30''	91%	P. E.
9°	Cadbury's	00:46''	00:12''	24%	P. E.
8°	Ariel	02:18''	00:12''	79%	P. E.
7°	Doritos	00:30''	00:10''	94%	F. E.
6°	Nike	01:00''	00:05''	91%	F. E.
5°	S7 Airlines	03:22''	02:42''	64%	P. E.
4°	Vodafone	02:29''	00:13''	39%	P. E.
3°	Shell	03:03''	00:09''	76%	F. E.
2°	Channel 4	03:12''	03:12''	0%	F. E.
1°	John Lewis	01:30''	00:03''	67%	P. E.

Source: made by the authors

T.T = Total Time of the advertising; T.E.B = Time of Exposure of the Brand; R.B = Recognition of the Brand  
E.R.P = Evaluation of the Reserched Public (P.E. = Partially Emocional; F.E. = Fully Emocional).

Regarding the videos division between fully and partially emotional, the results obtained suggest that the generation of brand awareness does not depend on the type of content, since two videos had 91% of brand recognition, one being classified as fully emotional (video 6) and the other as partially emotional (video 10). Thus, it is suggested that brand awareness occurs regardless of the content.

As regards the time of exposure of the brand in the videos, we couldn't find similarities among them, which makes sense considering that the proposal and purpose of creating a video depends on the context and the results expected by the presented brand or product. Thus, the exposure time varied between 3 seconds and 2 minutes and 42 seconds.

These results suggest the absence of a proportion of brand exposure time in the total time of the video. For the most viral video (video 1), the brand exposure time was only 3 seconds of a 1 minute and 30 seconds total. In this case, the brand exposure time was approximately 3% of the total video time.

Regardless of the absolute or relative exposure time, the creation of brand awareness appears not to be impacted. In the video by *Nike*, used as an example above, the time of 5 seconds meant 3% of the total but indicated brand recognition from 91% of the responses.

In order to evaluate how exposure time of the brand or video content influences the generation of brand awareness, we analyzed these variables in all videos. The results obtained suggest the inexistence of a direct relation between each of the variables and the respective generation of brand awareness, as exemplified below.

The first example, referring to the video by *S7 Airlines*, obtained a brand recognition index of 64% although the logo is present in approximately 80% of the total time. This suggests that, because the company is not present in the students's daily lives, the generation of brand awareness is insignificant. On the other hand, there is the video by *Nike*, in which the company logo appears for only 3 seconds, but the brand recognition rating was 91%.

The second example, refers to the video by *McDonald's* company. The presence of the logo was approximately 50% of the total time, it is fully emotional, but the students classified it as partially emotional. The video, which takes part inside a company's franchise, has emotional appeal and the story created for the campaign appears to have impacted the public much more than the presence of the logo, suggesting that brand awareness is generated regardless of the emotional aspect. On the other hand, there is the video by *Channel 4*, in which the students got the content of the video right, however, the brand recognition index was 0%, even with the logo being present during the entire video.

#### 4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

By the results obtained and the analyzes made, we identify and suggest that additional studies should be done with the intention of deepening the relationship between Viral Marketing and brand awareness. Although the results showed that *viralization* is generating brand awareness and that the type of content (fully or partially emotional) does not impact directly on brand awareness (measured by the correct index of responses), the analysis indicates the need of exploration in future researches. In this section we will discuss some of the observations made.

In this study, 40% of the videos were classified as fully emotional. In the study by Berger and Akpınar (2017), these authors indicate that only 20% of the emotional advertisements could be classified as fully emotional. They also mention that the companies responsible for creating these advertisements believe that the presence of the brand could negatively impact the amount of shares and views, thereby reducing brand exposure in the video. The present research, therefore, obtains different results from those published by Berger and Akpınar (2017) in which 40%, almost half of the students, classified the videos as fully emotional.

Additional studies are suggested because of our different results, as a way to understand and establish the most adequate classification of fully or partially emotional video, for example the already discussed *Channel 4* and *McDonald's*, since, regardless of the emotional aspects, the *viralization* could happen.

Regarding brand exposure time and the generation of brand awareness, we identified that the brand recognition most related to a previous knowledge, like it is seen in *Nike's* case, that presented low exposure time and a high index of correct answers. The reverse situation occurs with the companies *Channel 4* and *S7 Airlines*, where the exposure time was high, however, was not able to generate brand awareness. Thus, we suggest that future studies should be done to explore the relation between Viral Marketing and brand awareness, because the results show that if a company is already highly recognized in the market, *viralization* will only reinforce the existing brand awareness. While a company that has low brand awareness will not directly benefit from a viral video.

These observations have an important managerial impact, since, is not a good decision for a company with low brand awareness to allocate investments on the development of viral videos. In this case, companies should

initially invest on brand awareness campaigns with tactical activities and initiatives that will ensure longer brand exposure.

These recommendations, however, are also related to one of the limitations of this study, which is the low number of respondents. The sample of 30 students is relatively low and, therefore, it is necessary to conduct new studies with a wider and more diverse sample. The choice of students in a single discipline does not consider the influence of other aspects, such as demographic and regional factors. Although all companies used were multinational, some have a greater presence in the Brazilian market than others, which brings the need to carry out this study to other parts of the world.

## CONCLUSION

Viral Marketing has always attracted the attention of companies and schoolers. Word-of-mouth marketing worked in a period when there was no internet and even today with the use of digital platforms it is used to reach a wider public and ensures brand exposure. This research explored Viral Marketing in order to understand whether making a video go viral generates brand awareness and whether the presence of a company logo and exposure time impact brand awareness.

We conclude that viral videos create brand awareness, but in a limited way, since the previous knowledge on a particular brand also influences on the identification of it in advertisements or future videos, as seen in *Nike's* case. Thus, companies that have *viralized* videos but are not recognized do not fully benefit from its fame.

We also conclude that there is no direct relation between the presence of a logo or its exposure time and the generation of brand awareness. As an example, there is the case of *Channel 4* in which the brand was exposed throughout the entire video, however the brand awareness was not obtained in a significant way.

Considering everything that was said, we understand that this practical research contributes to the academic field by showing that the *viralization* of videos involves several factors and that the correlations found need a deeper study. It also contributes to the management field by proposing that investments on viral video as a form of brand awareness require a greater strategy in the process of content creation and a prior assessment of the level of audience knowledge of the brand, considering the platform in which the advertising will be placed, the heterogeneity of the target audience and the adherence of this public to the techniques used in the advertisement, since the expected results may not be achieved due to limitations in the use of this field and the underutilization of the information obtained in the advertisement data collection stage.

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