"A Study on Analysing the Effectiveness of Viral Marketing in the Era of Mobile Messenger Apps with special reference to WhatsApp"

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Abstract

The growth of social media has created a new marketing environment where the traditional marketing rules are no longer apply. Marketers experimenting with new ways to reach the customer are now heavily reliaing on online and social media. Internet technologies not only provides marketing information to customers but allow them to talk to other customers of their opinons and experiences. This has resulted in the incresing trend of viral marketing where marketing messages are shared among users, creating the exponential growth in the message visibility. Further, wider acceptance of smartphones has made it all the more easier as several mobile messenger apps like WhatsApp allow customers to get instant touch with family and friends at no cost. This study was undertaken to analyse the effectiveness of viral marketing with reference to Whatsapp. The data was collected through survey in Bangalore. Data analysis showed that WhatsApp is the most preferred social messenger used on daily basis. Results also revealed some key factors which improve the attention and acceptance of viral messages. More interestingly, viral messages were not liked only for their entertainment value, but also influenced consumer behavior significantly.

Key words: Viral marketing, Social media, Mobile messenger, WhatsApp.

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1. Introduction: Viral Marketing

Born with internet and technological gadgets today's customer is seen spending more time in the virtual world rather than in real world. The growth of social media has created a new marketing environment where the rules of traditional marketing no longer apply. Social networking sites especially mobile messengers have become important customer touchpoints. Hence, online and social media presence is now considered an essential part of branding strategy. These technologies have not only made brand communications faster but these allow consumers to talk about their experiences to others. This has led to an evolution of new electronic word of mouth (or word of mouse) which is also called as viral marketing.

Viral marketing is defined as a piece of content generated by an individual or business that instigates consumers to readily share it with their family and friends, thereby creating instant brand awareness and advocacy. In internet world, viral marketing is any marketing effort that induces web sites or users to pass on a marketing message to other sites or users. Hotmail has been doing this

successfully where it promotes its service and its own advertiser's messages in every email sent or received (Rouse, 2007). Viral marketing thus is any strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and impact. These strategies take advantage of rapid multiplication to explode the message to thousands and to millions of users (Wilson, 2005). Further, viral marketing is such a marketing phenomenon that encourages people to pass along a marketing message voluntarily (Anderson, 2008). Viral Marketing is extremely attractive to businesses because it can deliver amazing results in a relatively short period of time with no or minimal cost. Viral Marketing Communication has several benefits to marketers such as low cost, high reach, high credibility, accountability, fast speed, ease of usage and ability to reach a global audience. As this type of marketing focuses on personal experiences of consumers and their connections with other consumers, it can both improve brand awareness and help generate sales.

Today viral marketing comprises of diverse platforms, including e-mails, blogs, chat rooms, advergames, user forums, company websites, social networks, video clips, interactive flash games, ebooks, brandable software, images, or even text messages. Through this entire array of tools marketing messages are sent to the user either by the marketer or by the user or potential buyer to another user. Moreover, the creative nature of viral marketing enables a marketer to innovate new forms and vehicles for transmission of viral messages, including mobile devices.

Viral Marketing and Mobile Messaging Apps

With the increased usage of broadband and internet services there is an increasing trend for viral marketing. A study based on a sample of 2,259 adults, reveals that 75% of the people who find news online get it either forwarded through e-mail or posts on social networking sites, and 52% forward the news through those means (Schroeder, 2010). According to Cindy Gordon, vice president of new media and marketing, "communicating to a small but powerful group of fans first online to enlist their support is a smart way to ensure positive coverage in the mainstream press". However, success of the viral marketing is largely dependent on the acceptance and adoption of the viral marketing strategy by the user which is adopted by the marketer. Further, as smartphones have become popular, the number of apps for messaging on mobile terminal devices is steadily increasing. According to a survey conducted by Analysys Mason in 2012, more than 45% of all smartphone owners use some form of instant messaging app in addition to or instead of traditional SMS. Overall mobile app usage has increased 115% globally in 2013 where in messaging and social apps alone enjoyed the most dramatic growth of 203% (Smith, 2014). According to a study by Pew Research, mobile users send and receive an average of 50 text messages per day, among 18 to 24 year old users this increases to over 100. This recent rise of mobile messaging apps is signaling a shift from more public social media services like Facebook, to more private means of communicating with friends particularly among younger generation of smartphone users. The research also shows that there is a clear shift towards WhatsApp as the most preferred mode of day-to-day communications among friends (Tawiah, Nondzor, Alhaji, 2014). At present, WhatsApp is globally the number one among mobile messaging services with 500 million active users. This study intends to know how effective viral marketing is in the era of mobile messengers with special reference to WhatsApp.

Growth of WhatsApp

WhatsApp, founded in 2009 by Brian Acton and Jan Koum, is a cross-platform instant messaging app that allows user to send messages without having to pay for SMS. It can be used to send text messages, video, images, and audio media messages. Locations can also be shared through the use of integrated mapping features. WhatsApp's powerful features like instant messaging & sharing, automatic contact addition, and WiFi operation have popularized it with the masses. An end

user needs only a smartphone and internet service to use this innovative application that instantly connects them to friends and family. According to GlobalWebIndex, WhatsApp's monthly active user base grew 123% in the first three quarters of 2013 and more than half of messenger's current users have bought something via their mobile within a month. WhatsApp handled 10 billion messages per day in 2012, and by 2013 reached a new record of 27 billion messages per day. WhatsApp now has over half-a-billion monthly active users globally and its recent acquisition by social media giant Facebook in a staggering $19 billion deal has made it the most talked-about mobile app around the globe.

With over a tenth of the users from the country, India is one of the biggest markets for WhatsApp. 'There are 70 million active users who use the application at least once a month' according to its business head Neeraj Arora. It has also tied up with Airtel to provide special WhatsApp only data packs (Agrawal, 2014). The versatility of WhatsApp Messenger enables businesses and start-ups to market their products and services, interact with customers, promote deals and close sales. Many small and medium-sized companies are enriching user experience and effectively engaging with their customers to increase visibility across a wider audience.

2. Review of literature

By definition Viral marketing is just the traditional Word of mouth where any advertising or marketing effort propagates itself like virus using digital media. Also many are of the opinion that the two work exactly the same way with the only difference that word of mouth marketing takes place offline and viral marketing takes place online (Hendrix, 1999; Litvin et al., 2008). However, viral marketing is broader in scope than traditional word of mouth. Word of mouth is a 'decaying function' where the campaign tends to get smaller with each iteration while viral is 'compounding function' designed to spread through passion rather than simple conversation, and therefore it grows with each iteration (Laycock, 2007). Further, a message can change dramatically by the third or fourth time it's passed along verbally making word of mouth to fizzle out quickly. Consumers too feel that viral campaigns are entertaining, novel and in the trend. According to them social networks are the most preferred sites to share viral campaigns with family and friends (Dufour, 2011). Hence, it is important for marketers to realize the potential of viral marketing compared to word of mouth and integrate properly with traditional marketing techniques (Klopper, 2002).

Viral marketing is extremely attractive to small businesses and startup ventures with a limited marketing budget, since it costs very little but still delivers significant results in a very short period (Nucifora, 2000). However, unlike other forms of marketing, the viral message contains a form of advocacy or referral endorsement from one client forwarding messages to prospective clients. The success of viral marketing is thus depends upon if the viral messages are accepted and propagated. Therefore, viral messages must be designed uniquely to attract a specific target market and to make it interesting enough for people to want to spread it Daniels (2001). Care must be taken to introduce these messages into digital networks in a manner unlike spam (Klopper, 2002). Though versatility of social media allows marketers to use variety of forms comic strips and video clips found to be gaining the more attention of people (Dobele, et. al., 2007). Dufour (2011) found that the funny and innovative campaigns reach the attentions of the consumers. Also the actors like bloggers and buzz makers trigger the interest of the public.

The effectiveness of viral marketing is affected by a set of both external factors and internal factors. Generally consumers feel that the information provided in viral marketing campaigns is useful for making purchase decisions. However, trust/credibility (Wallace, 2000) and relevance play an important role in the attitude toward engaging in viral marketing. The more relevant the messages are, the higher the perceived information usefulness of the message (Cheung, 2008) which in turn influences the acceptance (Palka, 2009). This explains the fact that some users like to receive messages even though these are not from their acquaintances. Besides information usefulness, they like to receive messages which give the benefits of enjoyment, ease of use and personal satisfaction (Palka, 2009) and incentives (Daniels, 2002). Ghane et al., (2014) found that capturing the imagination, targeting credible sources, leveraging combinations of technology and easy to use products as well as internal factors such as inclusion and affection have significant effect on viral marketing. Further, viral marketing can be successful if the benefit of receiving a message is significantly greater than the nuisance or cost of passing it on (Fadhley, 2000).

Although there are not enough empirical evidences to prove that viral marketing campaigns affect or generate sales, Fairbank (2008) found that the brand awareness significantly raised after the viral marketing video was shown to the participants in their experiment. Also, majority of the participants stated that they would be more likely to buy a product after reading a good review about it. Kapoor et al., (2014) found that the influence of eWOM towards brand attitude is likely to be moderated by credibility perceptions derived from both the source and the content of viral messages. However, Larson (2009) is of the opinion that though there is a significant increase in companies that are employing social media strategies, there is still a need for identifying comprehensive measurement for the effectiveness of social media marketing campaigns. The empirical evidence also suggests that WhatsApp application is the most preferred mode of day-to-day communications than mobile voice calls among students particularly (Tawiah, Nondzor, Alhaji, 2014). Therefore, this study was conceived in order to throw more light on the factors which influence the effectiveness of viral marketing campaigns on Whatsapp mobile messenger app.

3. **Objectives of the study**
The primary objective was to study the effectiveness of Viral Marketing on WhatsApp mobile messenger. The specific objectives were:
1) To understand the preference and frequency of use of WhatsApp.
2) To study the factors that influence consumers to accept viral messages and their preference for types of viral messages.
3) To study the influence of WhatsApp viral campaigns on consumer buying behaviour.

4. **Research Methodology**
This study used descriptive research method where both primary and secondary data was collected. Primary data was collected using a structured questionnaire. A sample of 100 respondents was selected using a non-probability sampling technique and questionnaires were administered personally and the responses were recorded. The study was conducted in Bangalore among the people who own and use Smartphone.

Hypotheses

Following hypotheses were used in this study.

H1: There is significant association between gender and frequency of use of Whatsapp

H2: There is significant association between age and frequency of use of Whatsapp

H3: There is significant association between frequency of use and recognising the need for a product/service.

H4: There is significant association between frequency of use and buying of product/service.

5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis was done using SPSS (version 20.0.0). Percentage analysis, Cross tabulations and Pearson Chi-square analysis were used to answer the research objective and to test the hypotheses. The results are presented below in the form of tables and charts.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Characteristics		Percentage
Gender	Male	50
	Female	50
Age	Below 15 years	6
	15 - 20 years	10
	20 – 25 years	30
	25 – 30 years	37
	30 years and above	17
Education	Schooling	13
	Undergraduate	9
	Graduate	51
	Postgraduate & above	27
Occupation	Self-employed	13
	House-wife	8
	Government employee	20
	Private employee	35
	Student	24
Monthly Income (INR)	Below 10,000	19
	10,001- 20,000	9
	20,001-30,000	34
	30,001 – 40,000	22
	50,000 and above	16

From the above table 1, it can be concluded that 50% of respondents were male while 50% were female respondents. Majority of the respondents i.e., 67% were in the age group of 20 to 30 years indicating young sample. 51% of the respondents were graduates and 27% were postgraduates. Majority of the respondents i.e. 35% were private employees by occupation while 24% were students and 20% were government employees. Further, 34% of
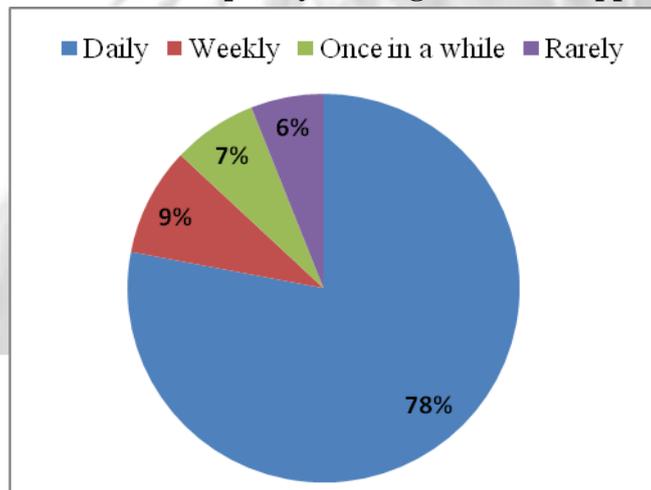
the respondents were in the income group of Rs. 20,000 - 30,000, 22% in Rs.30,000 - 40,000, 19% below Rs.10,000.

Chart 1: Social Apps Used
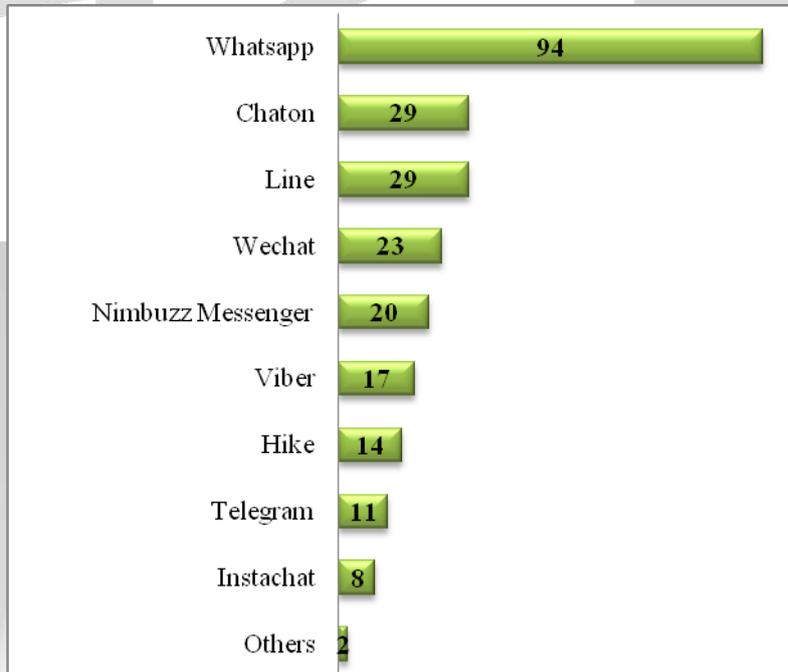
From the chart 1, it can be inferred that Whatsapp is the highest used social messenger with 94% of respondents using whereas Line and Chaton with 29% respondents using each. Wechat has 23% respondents using it.

Chart 2: Frequency of Usage of WhatsApp

From the above chart we can conclude that 78% of the respondents used Whatsapp daily, 9% of the respondents used Whatsapp weekly, 7% used Whatsapp once in a while and 6% rarely used Whatsapp.

Association of Gender and Age with Frequency of use

To understand the statistical significance of association of gender and age with frequency of use of Whatsapp cross tabulations were computed and Pearson Chi-Square test was conducted. Results showed that though there is no association between gender and frequency, but there seems to be an association between age and frequency of use. A small value of Pearson Chi-Square test (table 2) clearly states that there is significant association between age and frequency of use at 99% confidence level (Nargundkar, 2005). Therefore, H1 is rejected and H2 is accepted.

Table 2: Age and Frequency of use

Chi-Square Test	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	29.874	12	.003

**Chart 3: Familiarity of Viral Messages: Ever Heard or Seen**
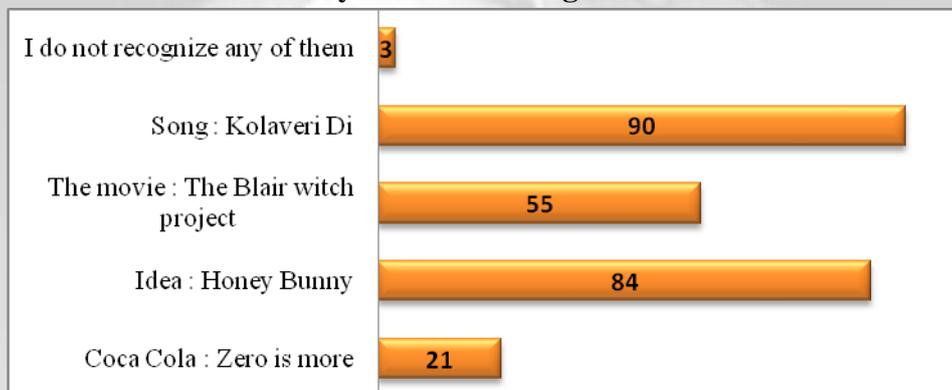
When asked about the recent viral messages, the song Kolaveri Di was most heard/seen with 90% of respondents familiar with it. Idea cellular's Honey Bunny video had 84% familiarity, the movie: The Blair Witch Project had 55% and Coca Cola: Zero is more had 8% familiarity. Only 3% of the respondents did not recognize any of them.

Chart 4: What catches attention?
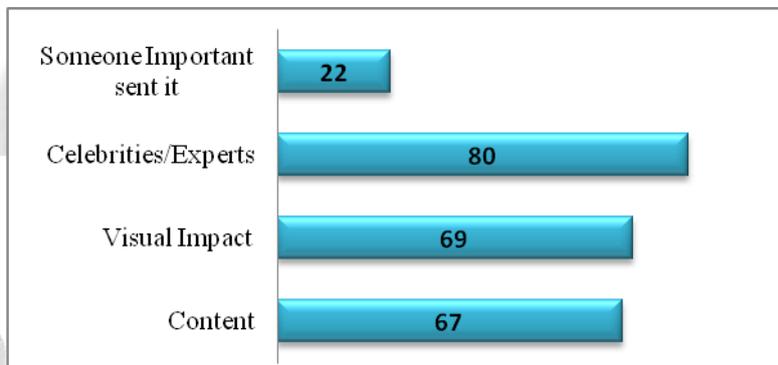
From the above chart 4, we can conclude that, Celebrities/Experts influence in catching attention in a viral message with 80%, followed by visual impact being with 69%, and content with 67%. However, someone important sent it being the 4th reason in catching the attention.

Chart 5: Elements which arouse more Interest
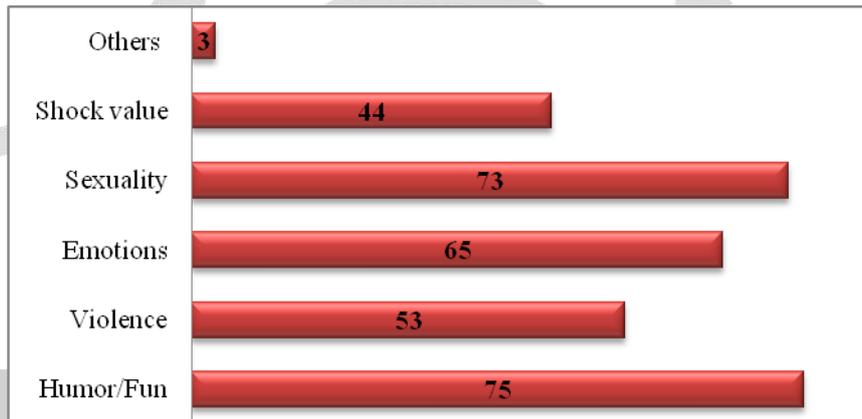
Above chart 5, shows that Humour/Fun is the most preferred theme with 75% of respondents, followed by Sexuality with 73%, Emotions with 65%, Violence with 53%, Shock value with 44% and others about 3%.
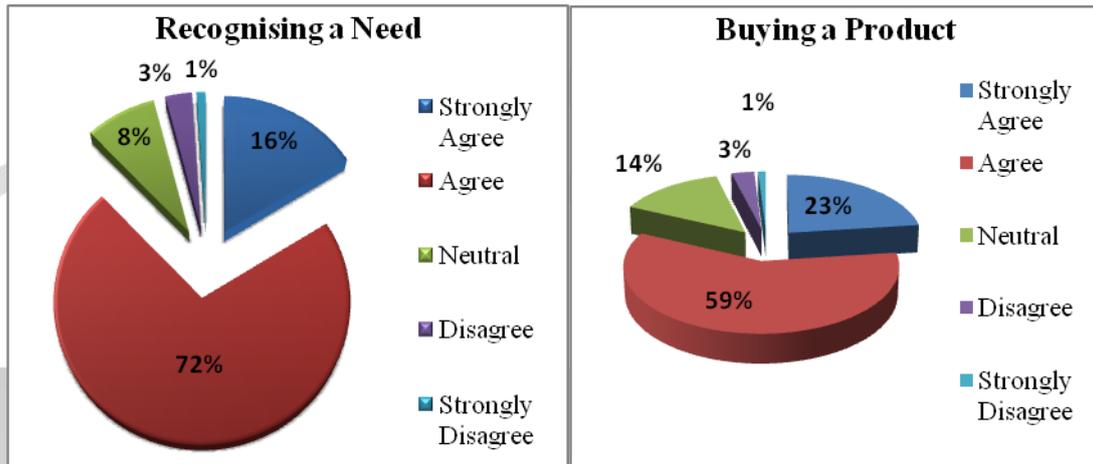
Chart 6: Preference for type of messages
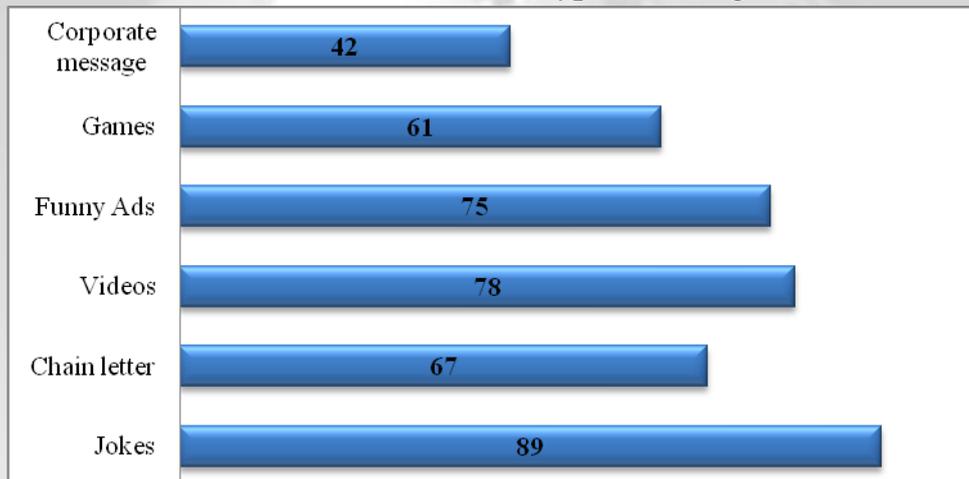
From the chart 6, we can conclude that respondents receive Jokes, Funny Videos and funny ads daily, followed by Games & Chain letters, they receive corporate messages very less frequently.

Chart 7: Influence of WhatsApp on Consumer Behaviour

From the above chart 7, it is clear that viral messages influence in both recognizing a need for the product/service and actual buying of the same. Total of 88% feel that viral messages what they see over WhatsApp have raised need for a product or service whereas only 4% disagree to that. Further, 82% of respondents are of the opinion that they get influenced to buy a product or service after seeing the viral message against 4% who disagree with that.

Association of Frequency of use with Recognising a need and Buying a product/service

To find out the relationship between frequency of use and recognizing a need as well as buying a product/service cross tabulations were computed and Pearson Chi-Square test was conducted. Results shown in tables 1 and 2, state that frequency of use is significantly correlated with both recognizing a need and buying a product/service at 99% confidence level. This proves hypotheses H3 and H4. The higher contingency coefficient values (.590 and .537) further indicate the strong association of frequency with consumer buying behaviors of need recognition and buying.

Table 3: Frequency with Recognising a need and Buying a product

Chi-Square Tests	Recognizing a need for product or service			Influence to buy a product or service		
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	53.435	12	.000	40.541	12	.000
Contingency Coefficient	.590		.000	.537		.000

6. Key Findings

1) Sample contained equal number of male and female respondents majority of them were in the age group of 20 to 30 years indicating a young sample.

2) Majority of the respondents were graduates either private employees by occupation or students pursuing postgraduation. Most of them belonged to the income group of Rs. 20,000 - 40,000 monthly.

3) Undoubtedly, WhatsApp is the largest used social messenger with 94% of respondents compared to other social messengers where more than 3/4th of them use it daily. Further, frequency of use of WhatsApp is strongly associated with age where as no such association found with gender.

4) Most of the WhatsApp users were familiar with recent popular viral messages such as the song Kolaveri Di, Honey Bunny video and the movie: The Blair Witch Project, indicating that this medium is more suitable for such messages than ads (Coca-cola: Zero is more)

5) Surprisingly viral messages with Celebrities, Visual impact and Content catch the attention more than the sender of the messages.

6) Clearly Humour/Fun is the most preferred theme followed by Sexuality and Emotions in viral messages. Also users prefer to share (receive and send) Jokes, Videos and Funny ads more than Games, Chain letters and Corporate messages.

7) Majority of WhatsApp users have agreed that viral messages do influence in recognizing a need for the product/service. This buying behavior is strongly and positively associated with frequency of use.

8) Majority of WhatsApp users have agreed that viral messages do influence in the buying of product/service. This buying behavior is also strongly and positively associated with frequency of use.

7. Implications and Conclusion

This study shows that Whatsapp is very popular and largest used mobile messaging app in India confirming with the industry reports. People in the age group of 20-30 years are frequent users, thus confirming with the fact that mobile messaging apps are more popular among the youngsters. Though there is a myth that viral campaigns are not made but happen by accident, this study shows that certain factors influence the acceptance of viral messages. While the celebrities and great visuals help to gain the user attention, elements such as fun, sexuality and emotions influence the acceptance of viral messages. Though versatile nature of viral marketing allows marketers to use various forms jokes, videos and funny ads are most preferred. More interestingly, viral messages are not liked only for their entertainment values, but also influence consumer behavior in recognizing a need and buying a product/service.

There is no doubt that mobile messaging apps have provided a new medium which allows a viral idea/message to spread instantly to millions of consumers at lowest cost. Therefore, it is advised that marketers to cleverly harness the amazing power of viral marketing to reach the mobile-bound audiences. However, the challenge is to create an exciting idea and get the users to engage and propagate the idea. This definitely calls for more research in the area.

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