



How brands try to generate viral marketing with social media influencers

**Kuinka brändit yrittävät luoda viraalimarkkinointia sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien
kanssa**

Lappeenranta–Lahti University of Technology LUT

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Examiner: Jaakko Metsola

ABSTRACT

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How brands try to generate viral marketing with social media influencers

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This bachelor's thesis focuses on studying how brands try to generate viral marketing with social media influencers. This research is limited to Finnish brands and influencers. The aim is to study if brands are including viral content in their marketing strategies, is there a framework or model on how to create a successful viral campaign, and if influencers are used as a part of viral marketing. The ultimate goal is to provide brands with a simple framework, which can be used in the attempt of creating a viral campaign that is not solely based on luck but a strategy.

The qualitative study was conducted by interviewing people working in marketing and building a brand image as well as working with social media influencers. All interviews were carried out as semi-structured interviews, meaning that the questions asked in the interview are made beforehand and stay almost the same for every interview. Every people interviewed had the right to say anything they wanted; no answer options were provided.

The research found out that viral marketing is not utilized as such by brands. It is a known phenomenon but considered hard to achieve mechanically. Viral campaigns are often created by accident or, at least, not intentionally. Social media influencers are not required for virality, though they are considered to increase engagement compared to traditional marketing.

TIIVISTELMÄ

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Tämä kandidaatintutkielma keskittyy tutkimaan, kuinka brändit yrittävät luoda viraalimarkkinointia sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien kanssa. Tutkimus on rajoitettu suomalaisiin brändeihin ja vaikuttajiin. Tarkoituksena on tutkia, sisällyttävätkö brändit viraalimarkkinointia markkinointistrategioissaan, onko olemassa mallia tai kaavaa, jonka mukaan onnistunut viraalikampanja luodaan, sekä ovatko sosiaalisen median vaikuttajat olennainen osa viraalimarkkinointia. Tavoitteena on luoda brändeille runko, jonka avulla viraalimarkkinoinnin mekaniikka on hyödynnettävissä eikä strategia perustu pelkästään tuuriin.

Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tutkimuksena, haastatteleamalla henkilöitä, jotka työskentelevät markkinoinnin ja brändinrakennuksen parissa sekä työskentelevät sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien kanssa. Haastattelut toteutettiin puolistrukturoituna haastatteiluina, joissa ennalta tehdyt kysymykset pysyvät pääosin samoina, haastateltavista riippumatta. Jokaisella haastatellulla henkilöllä oli mahdollisuus sanoa oma mielipiteensä, valmiita vastauksia tai vastausvaihtoehtoja ei ollut käytössä.

Tutkimuksessa selvisi, että brändit eivät hyödynnä viraalimarkkinointia. Viraalimarkkinointi on tunnettu ilmiö, mutta sitä pidetään vaikeana saavuttaa mekaanisesti. Viraalikampanjat syntyvät usein puolivahingossa. Sosiaalisen median vaikuttajia ei vaadita viraaliuden luomiseen, mutta niiden katsotaan lisäävän sitoutumista perinteiseen markkinointiin verrattuna.

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1. Introduction

Social media marketing is becoming more and more popular as their userbase increases and new services are being launched. Marketing has become more personal, and instead of companies marketing their products, social media influencers are often used to promote various products or services. Influencer marketing is considered a relatively new trend that thrives as social media platforms continue to evolve and gather more users. (Haenlein 2020). Services such as Youtube, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and recently, TikTok, provide companies with a huge audience, that can then be targeted with advertisements and promotions by social media influencers. Social recommendations are said to influence 26 percent of consumer's online purchases (Pophal 2016) as consumers are receiving an increasing amount of marketing stimuli daily

The use of influencers has brought alongside it a new way of marketing, called viral marketing. This is a relatively new subject and even though being increasingly popular and effective, it has resulted in relatively little scientific studies. Viral marketing is yet to be given a generally accepted definition, as it is often included as a subcategory of word-of-mouth and e-word-of-mouth (Wilde 2014). Viral marketing is partly made possible by the aforementioned social media outlets, where a global spread of a campaign or video, is possible. In Facebook, for example, billions of connected consumers can share marketing messages with a single click on their mobile devices or computers (Schulze, C. et al. 2014).

Alongside the conventional marketing outlets (newspapers, magazines, television, radio), there are now many other choices as well. This topic is relevant as social media is becoming more and more our main channel of information and consumes a huge part of our daily routines. The purpose of this bachelor's thesis is to study how brands try to generate viral marketing with the use of social media influencers. For the last few years, companies have been increasingly using influencers as a part of their marketing strategy and influencers have begun to receive an increasing amount of academic interest as well (Ruy & Park, 2020). Many of the content published by influencers often go viral due to the number of followers.

According to Twitter's statistics, in 2011 over 350 million tweets were sent per day; the equivalent of a 15-million-page book (Reiman, C. 2012). Influencer marketing is already proved to be impacting consumers' purchasing decisions in several different ways, like making it possible for a customer to visualize an object at home. Viral marketing is a natural extension of this; even though it doesn't require influencers, the two might often go hand in hand. Researching this subject is relevant and could hopefully provide insight on how brands could form a framework with which they generate viral marketing successfully. (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015)

1.1 Research objectives and questions

The purpose of this research is to study how brands try to generate viral marketing with social media influencers. The aim is to find out if viral marketing is something that is included in the marketing strategies, and whether there is a formula by which brands try to generate content that goes viral. In this research, there are a total of four research questions that are divided into one main question and three sub-questions, that will provide further, more specific information alongside the main question. The main research question of this thesis is:

“How brands try to generate viral marketing with social media influencers”

Additionally, there are a total of four research questions that are divided into one main question and three sub-questions, that will provide further, more specific information alongside the main question. Three sub-questions in this thesis are:

Q₁: What do brands aim for with viral marketing and the use of influencers?

Q₂: How do brands measure the effectiveness of viral campaigns with influencers?

Q₃: How could brands improve the process of creating a viral campaign?

These sub-questions aim in helping to understand how and if, brands are currently generating viral marketing with social media influencers. They help to find out if there is a ready-made formula that is used in the process and are viral content as well as social media influencers included in modern marketing strategies. These sub-questions also try to gain knowledge on how the process of making a viral marketing campaign could be improved and perfected, to gain respectable results that are based on a strategy rather than luck. These research questions are not set in stone, but rather exist as a guideline and formula, with which this thesis is concluded.

1.2 Research methods

This research will be conducted as qualitative research. Qualitative research applies to this research well, as it allows the focus to be in the details (Metsämuuronen 2006, 87-88). I plan to interview two to three people; the goal is the interview marketing professionals from brands and from advertising agencies, so that perspective can be reviewed from both ends of the table. How the brands see viral marketing and it is something that is currently being reached for, and on the other hand, how advertising companies see virality and what is their opinion on viral marketing. Qualitative research is much more beneficial in this case, as viral marketing is a relatively new phenomenon, and everyone might have different ways of defining or measuring it. The qualitative research method allows for interviews, in which it is possible to get first-hand experience and knowledge on how these subjects are viewed amongst companies and influencers as well as to describe real-life as it is (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara, 2009, pp. 161). It also gives the possibility to take into notice personal opinions and experiences, rather than having just plain, hard data to analyze. (Puusa, A. et al., 2020)

The interviews are planned to be half-structured, where the questions are prepared beforehand, and no answer options are provided. Questions can be sent to the interviewee before the interview if so requested.

1.3 Delimitations of the research

This research is limited to Finnish brands and advertising agencies as the information is easier to access and the outcome focuses on a domestic viewpoint. Interviewees are limited to people who work in marketing and have experience from working with brands and social media influencers as part of their jobs. This study aims to look at the subject from companies' perspectives, while also including the opinion of an advertising agency, which consults brands on their challenges. This way it is possible to gain an objective insight into how brands see viral marketing and virality, together with advertising professionals.

1.4 Previous research

Viral marketing and social media influencers are a relatively new topic and due to this, they haven't received large academic interest. Social media is developing every day and has received its current form only a few years ago. Studies about social media marketing, social media influencers, and virality/viral marketing still exist, but a large scale of academic credentials is yet to be seen. One key concept associated with viral marketing is word-of-mouth and eWord-of-mouth, and that has been researched quite thoroughly.

Research and studies about word-of-mouth started years ago since the powerful way of marketing received increasing attention. In the 1990s, as digital services and the internet began to develop more into their current form, eWord-of-mouth started receiving more and more attention. Viral marketing and virality are largely based on people spreading the message from person to person, and research has shown that emotions, as well as shareability, play a key factor in the process of viral content together with the element of surprise (Phelps et al., 2004; Lindgreen & Vanhamme 2005).

Many types of research and studies have been done about social media influencers and social media marketing. Saravanakumar & Suganthalakshmi (2012) studied the role of

social media marketing while Kemp, Randon McDougal & Syrdal (2019) studied influencers and influencer marketing from the company's point of view.

Brands working together with influencers in their attempt to generate viral marketing has yet to be researched, and for that reason, it is a relevant topic as social media is becoming more and more part of consumers' daily routine and content can be spread around the globe faster than ever. Viral marketing does not have a universally accepted definition and while studies and research about word-of-mouth and eWord-of-mouth, concepts used when talking about viral marketing exist, viral marketing itself has not been thoroughly studied.

1.5 Key concepts

The key concepts of this research are defined in the following section. As this research is conducted as qualitative research with multiple interviews, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the concepts that are used during the study.

1.5.1 Digital Marketing

Marketing is a term used to describe processes for creating and communicating offerings that propose a value for customers at large. Digital marketing is a term used to describe a company's actions of promoting services and products in digital media channels, contrary to traditional marketing that is mostly done on more conventional media channels, such as in magazines, television, and radio. (American Marketing Association, 2017)

1.5.2 Viral Marketing

Viral marketing is a phenomenon where people pass along a marketing message the same way a virus passes from one to another. It is often referred to as word-of-mouth or eWord-

of-mouth, as viral content is encouraging customers to spread the brand's marketing message forward. Viral marketing can be both online and offline, with the latter gaining more popularity due to the ever-increasing number of social media and internet users. (Investopedia 2021)

1.5.3 Brand

A brand is a name or other identifiable feature that distinguishes one's offering from others as well as generates a profit for the company (Deepak & Jeaykumar, 2019, pp. 1). Even though efforts can be made to shape the brand, the final decision and the brand image are made in the mind of the consumer. Brand image and the brand itself are formed when enough people agree on the perception (Moilanen & Rainisto 2009)

1.5.4 Social Media

Social media is an umbrella term for different sites where a user can create an account with a profile for themselves and interact through networking with each other. Social media platforms and mobile apps provide the users with a possibility to chat with each other, share media such as pictures and videos as well as join groups that share the same interest as the users themselves. (Wolf, Sims & Yang, 2018, 3)

1.5.5 Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing refers to marketing that is done on social media platforms, such as Instagram or Facebook. Social media marketing is a great way to boost sales while decreasing advertising costs (Blakeman, 2014), as well as being an essential tool in increasing the brand's exposure (WhatIs 2018).

1.5.6 Word-of-Mouth

Word-of-Mouth and electronic Word-of-Mouth refers to people passing information from person to person via traditional communication such as talking to each other or during a phone call or via electronic communication such as internet chats and forums or other social media services. Word-of-Mouth is what makes it possible for a marketing message or any other content to go viral. Word-of-Mouth, in general, means any information consumers share about a company, brand, or product via person-to-person communication or the internet. (Cruz & Fill 2008)

1.5.7 Influencer

Influencer refers to people who shape customers' purchasing decision by having impact and starting trends (Keller & Berry 2003). Social media influencers are influencers that mainly make an impact on customers through social media. The influencer is often followed by strong and loyal followers that share interests with the influencers, leading to the influencer being able to influence purchasing decisions made by the followers, due to authority and a public position (Influencer MarketingHub 2020).

1.5.8 Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is a way of marketing where influencers are used to promote the brand through marketing activities (Backaler, 2018, p. 1). With the help of an influencer, the company or brand can promote their services and products in a specific group who are loyal to the influencer and thus easier to persuade into making a purchase decision.

1.6 Research structure

This research is divided into individual parts; at the beginning of the report, there is an introduction in which the aim and the subject of the study is explained together with the research method and key concepts. Explaining the key concepts is very important due to the qualitative nature of the study, which includes multiple interviews. Following the introduction and all its sub-categories, is a theoretical part where the theoretical framework is defined and the foundation for the results and research are made. After the theoretical part, this research includes an empirical part where the analysis is done and the results are examined, based on the interviews and their results as well as possible secondary sources, would the interviews be too narrow or not completed. In the final part of the research, there are conclusions and a summary, where the whole research is tied together, and the conclusions are presented.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this thesis focuses on the concepts of marketing and viral marketing, social media influencers as well as brands. One of the main concepts associated with virality and viral marketing is word-of-mouth, or in the digital age e-Word-of-mouth. This subject is also discussed in detail as it is a key part of the theoretical framework. The aim is to study the methods used by brands in their attempts at creating a marketing campaign that has viral potential. Viral marketing and virality, though, are relatively new topics and, have yet to gather large academic interest.

In the theoretical part, all the key concepts will be discussed in detail. This chapter begins by explaining the concepts of brand, social media influencer, and viral marketing together with influencer marketing in general. The main theoretical framework also includes the so-called marketing mix, which at first consisted of four P's: product, price, place, and promotion, while then evolving from product-focused to a more customer-focused model of four C's, consumer, cost, convenience, and communication (Calder/Malthouse, 2003 p. 7ff). Viral marketing fits into the model of the four C's as it focuses on the customers and their interactions, rather than just the product. (Lahtinen et al., 2020)

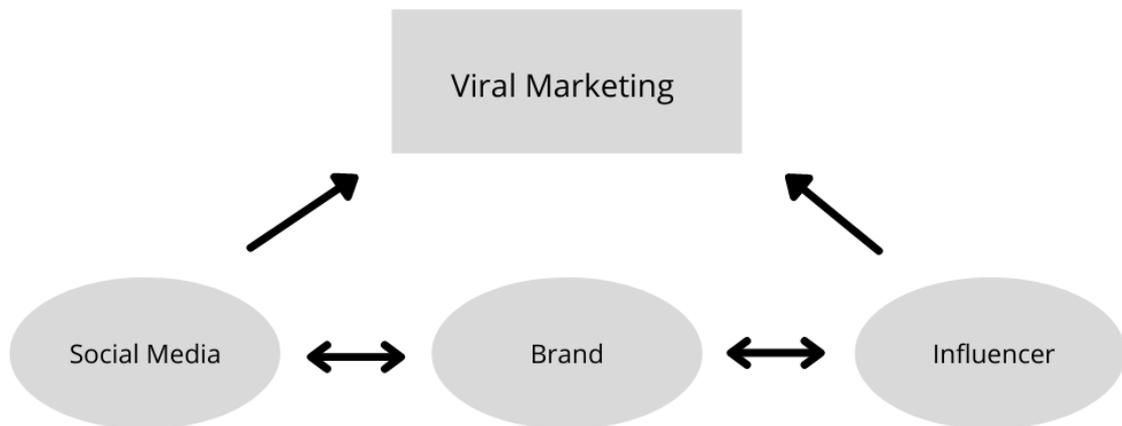


Figure 1. Theoretical framework

2.1 Brand

There is no single, universally accepted definition for a brand as the concept has evolved together with research. In short, a brand is an element or a group of elements such as a symbol, design, or a name, that are used to differentiate a product from the competitors. Brand is not a physical object that can be created in a factory or an office, as it is formed in customer's thoughts and minds. These assumptions and thoughts can be affected by the company via marketing, but only to a certain degree. Perception accepted by several people forms the brand. (Moilanen & Rainisto 2009), (Kotler 1991, p. 442). A strong brand allows companies to ask for a higher price and helps in maintaining the current customers as well as acquiring new ones, compared to a company with a lesser brand. This so-called brand value is defined by Kapferer (2008, 14) as “the ability of brands to deliver profits”.

A strong brand in a current business environment is one of the most important factors as it allows companies to build consumer loyalty and generate future demand and sales.

Studies have proved that brands can have a significant impact on one's purchasing decisions as well as helping to categorize choices from the offering available. Consumers become emotionally attached to brands, the same way they may become attached to a certain celebrity. According to Sarwar et al (2014, branding is the main way of connecting with customers and it has multiple ways of influencing consumers' opinions through brand awareness, brand image, and brand perception.

2.2 Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers are usually independent people who help a company in its marketing by influencing the targeted, potential buyers or consumers of a certain brand. Influencers can be bloggers, YouTubers, athletes, celebrities, or regular people, that specialize in specific areas of expertise. Social media influencers are people who have gathered a following purely on social media or use it as their primary platform to share content about their experience with a certain brand to promote the products or the brand itself. Influencers can be seen as company spokespersons that engage customers and promote brand awareness by affecting customers' purchasing decisions or shaping their opinions of a brand or product. (D. Brown, N. Hayes, 2008; Nordqvist, 2018; Influencer Marketing Hub)

Influencers have existed as long as humanity, but only recently has the term "influencer" been taken into use to describe people who solely use their popularity and following as an advantage to promote their own goals. The ever-growing offering of social media platforms makes it possible for virtually anybody to become an influencer, as sharing an opinion and experience with a large audience is easier than ever. Social media influencers have an important role in today's business as well as information technology and social networks, as they make it possible for marketing to change and for new communication methods to develop.

2.3 Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing, while being a relatively new concept, has gained a lot of academic attention in addition to the widespread use cases by companies. Influencer marketing means the process where a brand uses the influencer to achieve its marketing targets by communicating to the target audience through the influencer. Unlike in traditional marketing, the focus is now on the influencer rather than the brand or the product itself. This native advertising, which used to refer to paid advertisements in editorial content, is defined as "a form of paid content marketing, where the commercial content adopts the form and function of editorial content and is delivered with an attempt to recreate the user experience of reading news instead of advertising content." (Conill, 2016, p. 2) Social media influencers can avoid negative reception usually associated with sponsored content and advertisements, as they can take advantage of their content to justify the endorsement. "Congruence between the influencer and the commercial entity is critical to the acceptance of native advertising." (Breves et al., 2019, Kim et al., 2017, Schouten et al., 2019). Influencer marketing can be divided into two categories, paid and earned. In paid influencer marketing, companies try to advertise their products and create a positive brand image by paying the influencer for marketing their brand and products. Earned influencer marketing happens when an individual influencer decides to recommend a certain brand's product or service to their followers without getting paid (Myhrman, 2019). (Yesiloglu & Costello, 2020)

2.4 Viral Marketing

2.4.1 Virality

The ever-growing interest in social media has found many brands trying to create content that consumers will view and share with their peers. When enough people see and share the content, it starts to go viral. This so-called virality has no universally accepted, single definition. The majority associates virality to Word of Mouth (WOM) and later, to e-Word

of Mouth (eWOM). Word of mouth has been researched for years as it has been discovered to be the most powerful way of marketing. Research conducted by CIA: MediaEdge disclosed that 76% found word of mouth as their main influencing factor when making a purchase, while traditional marketing was responsible for only 15%. (Kirby and Marsden, 2006). Word of mouth is, in fact, one of the most influential sources of information and is considered more trustworthy as people trust their peers more than brands and marketers. This is because WOM is usually independent of the company and is instead spread from person to person, thus considered to be a more credible source of information. (Akpinar & Berger, 2017; Porter & Golan, 2006)

Word of mouth and e-Word of mouth share the same characteristics, with the main differentiating factor being the platform: WOM happens offline, directly from people to people through regular conversation, mail, or phone calls whereas eWOM happens online through different social media channels, email, and internet discussion forums. Thus, eWOM often happens with people who have little to no prior previous relationship with each other. The anonymity provided by such behavior can result in more comfort in sharing one's thoughts about a certain brand or a product (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006). Anonymity, on the other hand, makes it possible for companies and brands to give positive reviews about their products or services or pay for people to give positive feedback. This makes it harder for consumers to review the credibility of one's review about a certain product (Werde, 2003; Hinz, 2011)

2.4.2 Causes of virality

Even though viral marketing is not thoroughly researched, the mechanism behind it has gained some interest as well. Brands and marketers aiming to take advantage of the viral effect are trying to figure out what is the reason for some content to go viral and for others not to. Trying to manage word-of-mouth and eWord-of-mouth is a key aspect in creating a viral campaign. According to Berger (2013), virality is divided into six different steps: social currency, triggers, emotion, public, practical value, and stories.

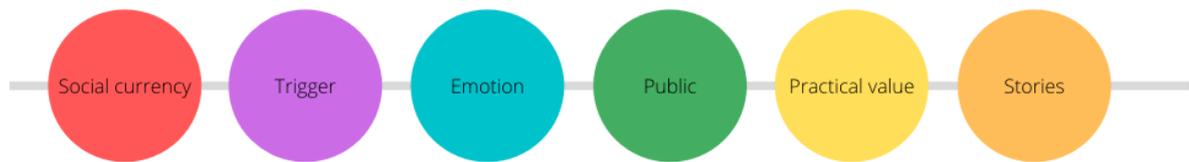


Figure 2. STEPPS – causes of virality (Berger, 2013)

Social currency refers to trends that happen in the consumer’s environment and that they are prone to expose to. People share content daily and brands are trying to create innovative content that could excite their potential customers. **Triggers** are images, sounds, words, and phrases that are associated with a specific company, product, or brand. When building brand image, companies are trying to create these triggers to be more easily recognized. **Emotion** is the third element in Berger’s viral framework; people are more likely to share content that they care about and even are emotionally attached. Emotions greatly affect virality as they have a vital role in being the decisive factor of one’s decision to share content with others. **Public** plays a part in virality, as consumers are more likely to attach to content the more public it is. Following each other’s example generates eWord-of-mouth and positively affects the creation of a viral effect. **Practical value** refers to consumers’ desire to be helpful with the information they share; content or a marketing message that houses practical value is relevant and might even provide additional information on top of the brand’s intended message. **Stories** are the main attractive factor of content marketing, which is storytelling. Best advertisements are almost hidden into branded content as the best way to deliver marketing message is to tell a story. The consumer will share the story instead of the product or service in it and this way the marketing feels more authentic and organic, as opposed to a clinical and forced advertisement. (Pressboardmedia 2019; Berger 2013; Berger & Schwartz 2011; Wasko and Faraj 2003; Yeoh et al, 2013)

2.4.3 Viral Marketing

Viral marketing is a relatively new form of marketing, though it is constantly increasing in popularity due to the rising number of internet users and people's presence on social media. Academic research and a universal definition of viral marketing are still lacking, with the current view amongst research are that viral marketing is a form of word-of-mouth advertising with consumers spreading the word of a certain company, brand, product, or service through their social media. According to Kotler et al. (2008), viral marketing is word-of-mouth happening on the internet, where people pass information to others, about a company, brand, or service in various channels. There are still arguments on whether viral marketing is a synonym for buzz-marketing; the difference between buzz and virality is that viral marketing generates buzz, which in turn generates eWord-of-Mouth. According to Mason (2008), viral marketing is ultimately a technique used by marketers to create an experience so interesting that consumers share it voluntarily. (Lee & Youn, 2009)

For companies and brands, viral marketing can be seen as a word-of-mouth strategy where the goal is to get the created content shared by viewers themselves. The method behind viral marketing is the spontaneous spreading of the content, the same way as a flu virus spreads. The company creates and releases the content (virus) but the marketing is done by the recipients themselves. What makes it different from the spreading of the virus, though, is that viral marketing is not tied geographically to a certain location or continent, as most of the marketing is done digitally. This allows the content to reach consumers globally in a relatively short period. (Miquel-Romeo & Adame-Sanchez, 2013; Van der Lans & Van Bruggen, 2011; Reichstein & Bruschi, 2019)

Though Word-of-Mouth and eWord-of-Mouth are strongly associated with viral marketing, the aforementioned can happen without any viral effect at all. The effectiveness of viral content comes from its ability to reach consumers globally at a fast pace with minimum effort. Companies creating viral marketing acknowledge that the content must be as interesting as possible while retaining its shareability that often comes in a form of easy accessibility and compact length. While viral marketing can happen both online and offline,

the principle of creating positive word-of-mouth stays the same. According to Krishnamurthy (2001), the goal is to create content that provokes people to share the information of a product, service, or brand from consumer to consumer, eventually leading to adoption by the markets.

2.5 Summary of the theoretical framework

Virality and viral marketing are often connected to social media influencers, as the content they share regularly reaches millions of views. Brands are trying to constantly develop and improve their marketing, while people working as influencers are trying to find ways to benefit more from paid promotions to earn a living. The concepts of brand, influencer and virality link together, forming a sort-of-bubble, in which the three interact with each other; influencers are trying to get as many views as possible, aiming for virality, while brands are using influencers to promote their new products. This creates an interesting subject for academic research and for this study. Social media influencers and brands have been studied extensively, while virality and viral marketing are starting to get more academic interest.

3. Research Methodology

This research studies how brands are trying to generate viral marketing with social media influencers. Most consumers see at least one viral video per day, as they scroll through different social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. The algorithms in these services work in a way that favors engagement and thus, promotes liked and viewed content again and again making viral effect possible. In this chapter of research methodology, the material used in the study as well as the research methods are discussed in detail. The empirical part of the research is explained, and the interviews are presented in a clear table.

This study was carried out as a qualitative study, as opposed to a quantitative study. The goal of qualitative research is to study the subject in a way that describes real life as it is. The qualitative study does not intend to find the truth about a certain subject; qualitative tries to account for the processes and factors that influence it. The aim is to get a better understanding that is achieved through quotations of actual conversations, truthful reporting, and first-hand experience. Opposite to quantitative research where the data is numerical, qualitative research uses observation as the main method of data collection. (Morse & Field (1996)

3.1 Semi-structured interviews

Qualitative research often uses interviews as the main method of collecting data and material, as the interviews allow for a relaxed atmosphere where the interviewee is allowed to answer without any restrictions. In this study, the interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews, also known as thematic interviews. A semi-structured interview is a common method as it does not define any answer options beforehand, and this way does not limit the interviewee's ability to answer the questions. In a semi-structured interview, a specific theme or themes are decided before conducting the actual interview, and all questions, as well as the framework of the interview, are then built

around that chosen theme. In the interview, the theme is disclosed, and the questions stay approximately the same from person to person. Questions can, however, vary between the interviews and questions can be asked in a different order, depending on the need. The aim is to achieve a natural understanding of the subject that is studied, without forcing any answers or presumptions. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2000; Longhurst, R., 2003; Adams, W. C., 2015)

In this research, all interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews and thus, all the material is collected using the aforementioned method. This type of interview allows gathering detailed information from each interviewee; this serves the purpose of this study particularly well, as the interviewees represent both companies as well as influencers. All research questions were made beforehand, with the option to change the order of questions and/or decide to not ask all the questions from every interviewee. Questions are listed in this research (Appendix 1) to make clear, what questions were used to gather the material for the study. All the interviews had a specific theme. These themes focused on brands' attempts at creating viral content if there are any, as well as the work with social media influencers as a part of the marketing strategy and especially the viral aspect of it. In some of the interviews, a set of more specific questions were asked to achieve a clear understanding of the answer. These questions are listed in Appendix 1 as well.

3.2 Research material and analysis

The material for this study was gathered from semi-structured interviews that were conducted in March and December 2021. Three people working with brands and in marketing were interviewed (Table 1). These people were chosen for the interviews as they represented a broad view of working in marketing with social media influencers as well as developing strong brands. Interviewees were selected for their assumed knowledge and the ability to provide insightful information through the interviews. Both men and women were asked for the interview but only men were able to attend out of the invited people. Questions for the interviews were provided beforehand if requested by the interviewees. This was done in one instance.

All the interviews were conducted online and remotely, using Microsoft Teams. This way the interviews could be arranged on relatively short notice and the interviewees were able to attend. All interviews were scheduled for 30 minutes, but depending on the interviewee, the duration varied a little. The first interview took 30 minutes, the second 34 minutes and the third 23 minutes, for an average duration of 29 minutes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was also more secure to meet remotely instead of traveling and meeting live. Interviewees were introduced to the study and the researcher. Intentions and the goal, as well as the background of the research, were explained. Interviewees were asked about the interview recording and anonymity, and they all agreed to the terms.

Material gathered from the interviews was analyzed using content analysis, which allows analyzing of the meanings and relationships of certain words, concepts, and themes. Content analysis is a suitable method to analyze qualitative material systematically and objectively. Intentions and patterns can be identified from the recorded material; the material can be interviews, books, newspapers, or web content. The interviews were analyzed independently while still being able to refer to the theoretical framework used in this study. With content analysis, it is possible to achieve a great understanding of the subject in the study; it allows for a transparent collection of data without the direct involvement of participants, so the presence of a researcher does not influence the results. (Bengtsson 2016)

4. Results

In this first chapter of the empirical part of the study, the material obtained from the semi-structured interviews is reviewed and analyzed based on the theoretical framework of the research described earlier. Three interviews were conducted, and the material from them was useful and provided insightful information for the study as well as valuable first-hand experience. Each interviewee was a marketing professional, responsible for working with, and developing strong brands and contemporary digital marketing, so the interviews can be considered reliable. Two of the interviewees worked for a brand and one interviewee worked for an advertising agency. First, the topic of influencer marketing is reviewed and analyzed, followed by viral marketing.

Interviewee	Age	Occupation	Experience
1	38	Marketing strategist	9 years
2	43	Marketing executive	20 years
3	38	Marketing strategist	14 years

Table 1. List of interviewees

4.1 Influencers

Interviews started with the interviewees being asked how they connect with the topic of the study. Each interviewee had a strong experience with social media influencers and how is it like to work with them as a brand and as a marketer. They had worked with brands that utilized social media influencers as part of their marketing campaigns. All agreed that working with influencers has been beneficial for the brand. One interviewee pointed out that in addition to the brand being satisfied with the process and the results, the influencers had been happy and satisfied with the process and experience, as well.

This kind of collaboration is beneficial for both parties. Interviewees agreed that social media influencers are especially good at engaging specific target groups such as families or

active people. Influencers can be chosen by the brand and its team, or the brand can request a separate agency to reach for the influencers based on the requirements provided for them. Many influencers prefer to work through these agencies rather than be in direct contact with the brand themselves. One interviewee working in an advertising agency told that in the planning phase, depending on the customer's needs, they may recommend using creative agencies that promote influencers as well as using and influencer SaaS platforms. It is also seen as important to compare the prices and offerings of these agencies as they can vary quite a bit and the most expensive offer is not necessarily the best, as having a bigger influencer might not reach the targeted audience as well due to the huge mass of followers.

"We took this so-called shotgun approach, that we chose four very different social media influencers"

Social media influencers are seen as an effective and suitable way to promote in the digital age as they make it possible to reach huge numbers of people that are committed and loyal to influencers they follow. Influencers with only a few thousand followers can be beneficial as they might be able to tap into a group of people that are otherwise skeptical about advertising and react negatively to it. Multi-channel digital marketing is used without a question, and it has become a new normal, covering digital channels such as Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn. Consumers need to be reached in the platforms they do use and want to use.

Each interviewee agreed that while it is not an absolute necessity, it is beneficial to work with influencers as part of a marketing campaign. Using social media influencers does not mean that more traditional marketing should be left out; different forms of marketing can be utilized together, and that way achieve greater results than by using just one method.

“Engagement through influencers in the users reached through them, in practice in humans, is multiple compared to traditional push advertising, we are talking like five to ten percent more”

Regarding the effect and results when collaborating with social media influencers, one interviewee told that their campaign was a success due to the use of a wide range of different influencers that were able to attract different groups of people, while another interviewee told that by using social media influencers, a marketing campaign can be up to ten percent more effective, compared to a campaign where influencers are not used. Few campaigns are solely based on influencer marketing, though, as it is seen more as a complementary element among other means of marketing. The data gathered from these campaigns show that consumer engagement can be almost ten percent greater compared to campaign without influencers.

“Our partner agency said that these were really good results and this was their best municipal cooperation that they had done”

“With the majority of brands, influencer marketing has been part of a campaign, where it has been tested.

4.2 Virality

The first part of the interviews focused on the interviewees' experience of working with social media influencers. The research question of this study is “how brands try to generate viral marketing with social media influencers”, so it is essential to gain knowledge about the experiences the interviewees' have had regarding influencer marketing. Social media influencers and viral marketing do not necessarily go together, so the interviewees were asked questions about influencers and viral marketing from different perspectives to gain a wide spectrum of opinions regarding the topic. With these questions, the attempt was to

find out whether the interviewee was familiar with the concept of viral marketing in the first place and then dive deeper into the concept and their experiences of it. Opinions and experiences about viral marketing ranged from person to person and it was clear that the topic is still new, and the industry has yet to find out how to perfect and utilize the phenomenon to its full potential. Virality and viral marketing are known topics but the mechanics behind them are unknown and attempts at creating virality are based more on experimenting rather than on a framework.

Each interviewee was familiar with the concept of virality and has had some experience working with brands and projects that had either gone viral by accident or that we're able to create virality intentionally. When asked to define virality, each interviewee agreed that there is no one universally accepted definition, but all associated virality with word-of-mouth and eWord-of-mouth. A common theme was that virality happens without the brand pushing the message to the customers in various outlets and that it can happen both offline and online. Interviewees were on the common grounds about virality, as they associated it with some content turning into a phenomenon. This phenomenon is then spread from person to person without the brand doing much at all, especially not spending money on the campaign.

"A thing turns into a phenomenon and spreads without paid marketing, or without pushing in social media, draws attention and conversion and gets free visibility among people, spreads like a virus among people"

"Virality, in my opinion, means succeeding in creating a phenomenon or content that naturally spreads and engages people and segment, target groups, so that it is not needed terribly, use the word terribly, to help with paid advertising budgets"

4.3 Viral marketing

Viral marketing was seen as something that can't necessarily be manually achieved, but rather as something that needs a bit of luck and the right timing. Interviewees agreed,

though, that for viral marketing to work and for the content to go viral, the campaign needs to be unique and maybe even shocking. The content needs to be shareable and relatable or made in a way that touches consumers' emotions. People are more likely to share content they feel emotionally attached to. This can be achieved, for example, by telling a story that contains the marketing message. One interviewee told that in their years in marketing, only one time had a campaign go viral. When asked if the factors influencing the virality of that certain campaign can be identified, it came down to a unique and bold idea that had not been done before in such context. The viral effect was created when the campaign got nationwide attention from news outlets and a popular influencer that spread the message even more. The campaign was not created with virality in mind but as fun and exciting to get people's attention.

"In my mind, virality is something that is created by accident, or, with very little intention."

"If we talk about the viral in the sense that it was once understood to be published but something and it starts to spread organically like a snowball, then it is quite impossible to create today"

Two of the interviewees, one working for a brand and one for a marketing agency, told that they are not intentionally trying to create viral marketing or viral content. Viral marketing is seen as a phenomenon that may be the result, a by-product of a well-designed and planned marketing campaign. Creating viral marketing and virality intentionally has proved to be next to impossible and it is seen as relatively unachievable if done solely for the purpose of trying to create a viral phenomenon. When asked about the possible reasons and factors behind someone or something going viral, the interviewees agreed that, even though some things might influence virality, it isn't necessarily creatable mechanically. It was argued by one of the interviewees that, by finding out the exact rationale formula behind the virality and viral marketing, then it would no longer be viral marketing, the same way if a magician reveals their secrets, the magic will lose all its meaning. Virality, in the end, is born when the unexpected happens.

“If someone had cracked the exact rational formula, that this plus this divided by that equals viral marketing, then it would no longer be viral marketing”

All interviewees agreed that there are things that can be done to add to the possibility of the content going viral. Brands must create and design quality content that acknowledges the wants and needs of the targeted group of people. Communication channels must be used efficiently and in the right way for the content to be seen where it needs to be seen. The content itself must be inclusive and impactful as well as shareable, as people sharing it from person to person organically is ultimately the thing that creates virality. One thing that stood out from the interviews, was that all interviewees agreed that for a marketing campaign to go viral, it needs to generate emotions in the recipient because, as discussed in the theoretical part, people are more likely to share content that they feel emotionally attached to. These emotions can be touched by having a great story-based campaign or by having a shocking, unexpected twist in the content that either makes the consumer laugh or be in awe for whatever reason. If the marketing is viewed as boring and dull, people will not share it with each other.

“It’s the sum of good coincidence and luck, as well as understanding well-designed content, and inclusive and impactful content, as well as understanding, good PR and good channels”

All interviewees agreed that using social media influencers is not necessary in order to create viral content, as by having an original idea, people might share it without the presence of an influencer. One interviewee said that social media influencers are seen, though, as a possible advancement for the creation of virality as their loyal follower base ranging from few thousand to hundreds of thousands, is more likely to share the content published by the influencer, even if it had a promotional aspect in it. Virality is not able to happen if people do not see the content, and in this regard, social media influencers might

help as their baseline for views and engagement is in principle bigger. According to one interviewee, if the content does not have the right elements and it does not meet the requirements for viral potential, then having a social media influencer share it might be next to pointless, as it is not necessarily the largest possible baseline view count that matters; virality requires the content to be spread among the masses that do not follow that particular social media influencer. This highlights the fact that viral content must have some know elements in it, otherwise, it does not matter whether it is shared by an influencer or not.

"I don't know how particularly good influencers are at creating virality, we come to the point, that if the material does not meet these requirements I described, then how it is beneficial if someone shares it with paid promotion"

"By choosing the right people who genuinely influence the right mass and the people who follow them think similarly, you surely will be able to create, I don't know if virality, but a phenomenon that stands out and products and services that are built through recommendation, passing to the larger masses from there"

Again, virality is considered different from intentionally creating a campaign that has the potential to grow to be a phenomenon. The latter is something that advertising agencies and brands are continuously trying to develop for their marketing to be as effective as possible. The intentional creation of virality and viral marketing was not recognized by interviewees working with brands nor was it recognized by the interviewee working in an advertising agency. When asked if having a bigger audience and more views equal more conversions, one interviewee told that it is not beneficial to please everyone; brands should target a smaller audience and when those people are engaging with the content and building the hype from inside to outside, the content will reach more and more people and the relative conversion rate will be better, compared to promoting unengaging content to masses.

5. Discussion and conclusions

In this last chapter, the empirical part and the results from the interviews are compared and reviewed against the theoretical framework. The study and the topic are summarized, and the results are discussed and conclusions from the research are presented with the sub-questions of the study. The key findings of the study are collected and presented in a single figure (Figure 3) to showcase what this study was able to find out. The possibility to continue with the topic in the form of future research is reviewed and discussed together with possible managerial and practical implications, that may benefit managers and brands in their work on marketing campaigns and studies.

5.1 Discussion

This study was conducted to find out, how and if brands try to generate viral marketing using social media influencers. In the digital age, the way companies do marketing has changed and keeps changing drastically all the time. The internet and all the different social media platforms that keep people connected, make it possible for consumers to share content to the other side of the world in a matter of seconds. This has created a new phenomenon called eWord-of-mouth, which in a nutshell means people talking to each other through the internet. It can be seen as a modernized version of the conversations people used to have on the marketplace or in the grocery store, a phenomenon called word-of-mouth, only now these discussions are not limited to time, space, or location. This has remarkably increased the amount of viral content and thus, academic interest regarding the topic has started beginning to generate. Valid research concerning viral marketing are currently limited but word-of-mouth, the concept associated strongly with virality, has been studied extensively. Despite all the buzz around virality and viral marketing, there is no universally accepted definition that explains virality and viral marketing thoroughly. In addition to academic interest, brands all around the world have

been introduced to virality and the potential of viral marketing is seen as both interesting and difficult. Being able to constantly create content that reaches virality and spreads globally from person to person, enables brands, both personal and corporate, to develop into overnight successes that simply were not possible before.

To support the topic of the study and to be able to gather as relevant material as possible, this study was conducted as a qualitative study; this research method allows the gathering of material through semi-structured interviews. In these interviews, three marketing professionals were interviewed and as a result, relevant, quality material was gathered and utilized in the empirical section of the study. The interviews allowed the material to be relevant and topical, as the interviewees shared their most recent experiences and opinions. These people work in the campaigns from which the data is pulled to measure various factors such as reach and engagement, so they are a valid source of information when trying to understand why and how something happened.

The main research question in this research was “how brands try to generate viral marketing with social media influencers”. This main question was supported with three sub-questions that aimed at diving deeper into the viral marketing and social media influencers from the brand’s point of view. These sub-questions helped to find out what brands aim for with viral marketing and the use of influencers, how do brands measure the effectiveness of viral campaigns with influencers as well as how brands could improve the process of creating a viral campaign. One common factor with all these questions was the assumption that brands are interested and using, or at least planning on using viral marketing. The key findings of this research are collected into a single table to more illustrate what this was able to find out on the topics of viral marketing and brand together with social media influencers.

5.2 Conclusions

What do brands aim for with viral marketing and the use of influencers?

The evolution of digital services and different platforms means, that brands and advertisers are in constant need of development. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Tiktok offer brands the potential to reach millions of people within a few seconds. In addition to brands, regular people have the possibility to thrive on social media and gather a following. The number of social media influencers is increasing every day, as more people follow people they can relate to, they feel emotionally attached to, or that they find interesting. Social media influencers have a big impact on consumers' purchasing decisions as well as how consumers form their opinions. Brands have started to utilize this potential by collaborating with influencers in order to promote their products through a person that has influence over the brand's targeted demographic group. Influencers are mostly used as a part of a marketing campaign, rather than as a standalone form of advertising. The use of influencers is beneficial, as they generate up to ten percent more engagement compared to content advertised in a more traditional way. Influencers can be contacted directly by the brand, but most influencers prefer to work through agencies that handle the promotion and selling. Having more followers does not equal a higher conversion rate, so when choosing influencers, the process is important, and the targeted segments and demographics should be the defining factor.

According to this study, viral marketing and virality are seen as anomalies, that are not possible to achieve mechanically and constantly. Brands are not trying to generate viral marketing as such; what brands are trying to do, is generate phenomena that people will share and feel emotionally attached to. This content can then be shared from person to person and thus, generate more reach from inside to outside, without the brand pushing the content too much after the first stage. Viral marketing is considered to be an interesting topic and one that raises many conversations as well as academic interest. However, the high visibility and reach of the masses that define virality, are less beneficial to a brand when compared to targeted advertising that engages the intended demographic.

How do brands measure the effectiveness of viral campaigns with influencers?

Virality is often associated with huge numbers of views and engagement as people share the message and it spreads around the world. From the perspective of a brand, this bigger reach is not necessarily the main thing that is desirable. Higher visibility might not lead to a higher conversion rate. Brands want to reach people who have the potential to be interested in the promoted content and this is easier if the share-of-voice is smaller. It is not beneficial to promote one thing for the whole mass; this argument is the main factor why segmentation and targeting have become so important in modern, multi-channel marketing. With a successful viral campaign, the targeted group cannot be influenced by the brand as people are spreading the message organically and the person receiving the content might not be in the demographic seen as interesting and valuable for the brand. High visibility and bigger reach have their upsides, of course, as reaching a mass big enough ensure that there are people from every demographic. However, people can be reached with targeted marketing much efficiently and cost-effectively.

As seen from the results, though, viral marketing is something that is not considered to be relevant and first and foremost, utilized. Virality and the derivative, viral marketing, are seen as something that is not mechanically achievable, not in a constant and measurable way, at least. Luck, right timing, and coincidence play a big factor in virality, and these things are something that advertising agencies and brands cannot rely on. If virality and the mechanism to achieve it, were to be cracked somehow and an exact rational formula developed, then it would become obsolete is viral. Virality thrives from its surprisingness and unexpectedness. For a celebrity with tens of millions of followers, a regular post on social media can reach millions of likes. Even though visibility and engagement play a big factor in virality, those posts are still not considered viral. Virality cannot be defined by the sole number of likes, as the baseline amount for reach varies so much. For something to be considered viral, there needs to be the element of people spreading the content from person to person without pushing and without paid promotion.

How could brands improve the process of creating a viral campaign?

The mechanics and the exact rational formula behind viral marketing are not defined universally, but some factors that might increase the content to go viral were discovered through the interviews used in this study. It was agreed that the viral effect cannot be manipulated but, for a marketing campaign or any content to go viral, it needs to meet some key requirements. The content must be shareable, it needs to touch the emotions of consumers, and preferably it should be tied to a form of a story. The content must be well designed, and the promotion must be executed with a good understanding of PR and the use of the right channels. For people to share something, it must draw attention and conversions. Social media influencers are not required in viral marketing as the content is the main factor defining the viral potential; if the content is lacking, there is no point to get it shared by an influencer as it will not increase the potential of virality, though the baseline reach through an influencer might be larger.

KEY FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH	
SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS	VIRAL MARKETING
<p>Influencers are used as part of a marketing campaign</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brands don't use influencers as the only means of marketing, but admit they increase engagement compared to traditional marketing. <p>The number of followers does not define the conversion rate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When choosing influencers, it's often more beneficial to choose a niche influencer. • Consumers can often be targeted more efficiently with an influencer that has less followers; this is also more cost effective. 	<p>A thing turning into a phenomenon</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's the sum of good coincidence and luck, as well as understanding well-designed content, and inclusive and impactful content, as well as understanding, good PR and good channels. <p>Not used by brands, almost impossible to generate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brands don't intentionally try to generate virality, as it is not efficient even when succeeding. Targeting smaller segments is more beneficial. <p>Influencers are not required for virality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencer sharing the content is pointless if the content itself does not have the potential for virality; it might provide an initial boost, though.

Figure 3. Key findings of the research

5.3 Practical implications

The ultimate goal for this research was to provide brands and advertising agencies with a framework of viral marketing, that could be utilized in the creation of a viral marketing campaign. Virality and viral marketing are seen as phenomena that cannot be manually achieved, at least not in a constant way. This study was able to identify and gather some of the factors that increase the possibility of content going viral. Virality is based on people sharing the content from person to person, and for people to share something willingly, a few requirements defined in the last paragraph should be met. These findings do not explain define virality nor do they provide a rational, re-usable solution to create virality. They do, however, provide brands with potential ways to increase the probability of virality. Even though virality is not something brands are trying to achieve intentionally, with these steps the quality of their marketing campaign should evolve and, in addition, increase the chances for it to go viral. The factors found in this research are shown in Figure 3. Based on the Figure 2, causes of virality by Berger (2013) and the findings from this study, a new formula for promoting virality was made. The formula is shown in Figure 4, and it provides easy-to-follow steps that, according to the interviews in this study, are the factors needed for a content or campaign to go viral. This highlights the outcome of this study, in which, virality cannot be mechanically achieved but, its probability could be somewhat influenced.

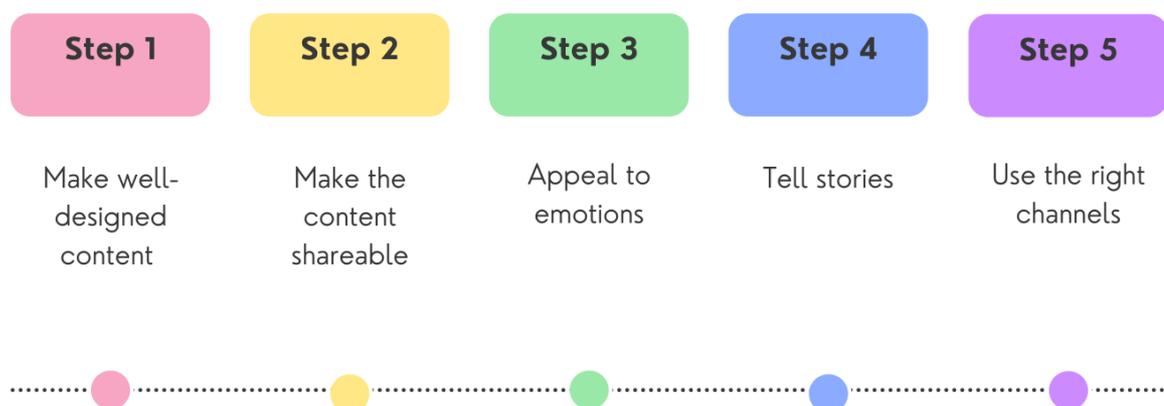


Figure 4. How to promote virality

5.4 Reliability of the research

This study was conducted as a qualitative study. The material used in the study was collected from three separate interviews, where marketing professionals were interviewed about the topic of the study. All interviewees had years of experience working in marketing and developing brands. Interviewees had worked with different brands and on a variety of marketing campaigns, that were not focused on a single industry. One interviewee had specific knowledge of one brand and the two others had worked in different marketing agencies and this way, worked in projects for multiple different brands. This increases the reliability of the research as the interviewees were able to provide a broad view of across industry borders.

Each interviewee was familiar with the topic and terms used in this study and was able to answer thoroughly while at the same time, providing valuable information to be used in this study. This increases the reliability of the research, as the interviewees were giving opinions based on their own experiences over the years. These individuals were chosen for the study as they were expected to be able to provide realistic and current opinions regarding the topics and thus, help not only to understand the topic but the factors behind it. Three interviews provided this research with large amounts of material that could be then analyzed using content analysis. All interviews were conducted in Teams through remote connections, and each one was recorded for easy analyzing of the material afterward. Based on the three interviews from three different individuals working with brands and advertising agencies, each having years of experience, this research can be considered reliable.

5.5 Future research

Future research could be conducted around viral marketing and virality when the topic has gained more academic attention, yielding more research and possible implications by brands. This research was limited to Finland but, viral marketing and virality are both international phenomena; in the United States, many brands owned by influencers and

actors have sold for hundreds of millions after receiving viral attention. By getting to interview one of their representatives, one could gain valuable information on virality and viral marketing as those brands are constantly able to generate virality, albeit often because of their famous owner. In this study, no influencers were interviewed. Their perspective on virality could offer contrast against the opinions of brands and advertisers, as influencers have often succeeded in creating viral content in their careers in social media. This research, however, focused on the viewpoint of brands, and thus no influencers were included in the interviewees. (Zetbusiness, 2021)

In future research, the definition of virality and viral marketing could be created, in addition to the practical solution for creating viral content; even though it might not be considered viral marketing anymore, brands could utilize that framework in their quest for marketing. From social media platforms, Tiktok is the one where virality is easily achieved. Studying the marketing potential of Tiktok and how visibility in the app generates conversions, could be interesting and through the research, brands could find useful information to further develop their marketing in the always developing digital world.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview questions

Social media influencers

- How is your profession related to the topic of the study?
- What are your brand's goals in marketing?
- What kind of digital marketing do you do?
- Do you collaborate with social media influencers?
- Has collaboration with influencers been successful?
- How do you choose a suitable influencer?

Viral marketing

- How would you define viral marketing?
- Do you seek virality?
- How do you seek virality?
- Are you currently doing viral marketing?
- How do you think a successful viral campaign is created?
- Does larger visibility necessarily lead to more conversions?
- Are social media influencers required to create virality?