The Impacts of Viral Marketing on Vietnamese Travelers Decision to Thailand — A Study in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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Abstract—This study was conducted to identify the impacts of viral marketing on traveling decision. Quantitative approach was applied with questionnaire directly delivered to 215 respondents who have traveled to Thailand. The empirical results showed that information credibility, brand recall, and information achievement through websites directly affected traveling decision. In addition, social network, video, email, and information sharing through website indirectly affect travelling decision through the mediations of information credibility and brand recall. This study suggested that tourism companies should aware of significant forms of viral marketing for better marketing campaigns.

Index Terms—Viral marketing, brand recall, traveling decision.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Internet has become an indispensable part of people's day. New digital technologies have changed the ways of communication, collaboration and interaction. According to Internet statistics, the number of Internet users is increasing exponentially every second. In 2005, the number of users reached one billion, the second billion was reached in 2010. After four years, there were three billion people using the Internet in the world. Almost 42% of the world's population has access to the Internet as of January 2015 [1].

With the ongoing development of the new technologies in today's world, traditional advertising has turned to viral marketing's alternative strategies. Traditional advertising must renew its model because it is no longer sufficient to build brand awareness and lead to purchase decision [2]. For example, people rarely sit through the 30-second TV commercials. Moreover, the customers' habit of skipping and eliminating the ads is a great threat to the TV commercial advertising industry. Quickly recognizing the growth and evolution of the internet, marketers have gradually changed their strategy from traditional marketing, such as TV and newspapers, to viral marketing, which employs the Internet to encourage customers to share marketing messages with others [3]. Viral marketing is not a new term in the marketing field, but it has brought new wind to the marketing trend of the decade [4]. Viral marketing offers an opportunity to connect a vast network of potential buyers and continue to pass the information along like a virus. Marketers are trying to harvest

the worldwide accessibility to the internet to create a new era of marketing. A successful viral marketing campaign could lead to an unprecedented influence on brand awareness, credibility and sales [5].

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Viral Marketing

There are various definitions of viral marketing made by many researchers. Most studies have the same explanation about the term "viral", which derived from the word "virus" in medical and health sciences literature [6]. Marketers can take advantage of the spread, which was similar to an infectious disease, or virus, to explode the message to thousands or even millions of individuals [3]. Anybody can become a virus if they have an effect on other's perception of the value of a message [7] and the information of the company and its message is transmitted to other potential buyers within their network(s) [8].

According to Helm, S (2000) [9], viral marketing was deemed as the transmission of digital products among customers. These customers then transmit the products to other customers via electronic mail, and the message is continually passed on. The researcher also described it as strategies that promote the accumulating of new coming customers who engage in the electronic market. Companies use customers' communication networks as a comprehensive marketing strategy for advertising and distributing products and an option in finance strategies. The study of Wilson, R. F. (2000) [3] concluded that viral marketing was the strategy of passing marketing messages from customers to others and its continued growth resulted in significant influences in customers' social sphere.

One of the most often cited definitions of Viral marketing is "any strategy that encourages individuals by using digital media to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the "message's exposure and influence; like viruses, such strategies take advantage of rapid multiplication to explode the message to thousands, to millions" [10]. Viral marketing is the method to deliver and spread the message among individuals through the Internet without the involvement of the original source. These users will continue to filter and transmit to those interested in the message's content [11]. Over time, the definition of viral marketing has become more complicated because the use of the Internet expands exponentially. Jain (2013) [12] concluded that viral marketing was a word-of-mouth

marketing strategy which is accomplished through personal face-to-face communication, whereas viral marketing takes place via online platforms such as video, social network sites, blogs, etc. However, maintaining a balance between persuading the consumers to transmit the message through the Internet and not making them feel as though they are becoming a virus in marketers' marketing strategies must be considered carefully. The finding also indicated that the terms viral marketing and electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM) could be used interchangeably. Many researchers also developed a more general definition of viral marketing which is defined as the innovation of "Word-of-mouth" marketing but depending on digital platforms to spread the message. ([2], [5], [8], [13]).

B. Brand Awareness

Creating brand awareness is an important step in marketing campaign because it creates the ability to distinguish one brand from other brands. Aaker (1991) [14] refers to the term "brand awareness" as a node in memory that allows the brand to "anchor" its other information to consumer memory. Brand awareness reflects the strength of the brand in customer's memory, as measured by the capacity of customers to identify to a brand under different conditions [15] .

According to Kotler & Keller (2012) [15] a brand comes to customer's mind through various elements like "the brand name, logo, symbol, character, packaging and slogan". Building brand elements accurately plays an important role in the success of influencing consumer behavior.

The Kotler & Keller's study also focused on the breadth and depth of awareness. The breadth describes the different types of purchase and usage situations in which the brand comes to mind; whereas the depth awareness measures the influence and the ease of how likely it is for a brand to come to mind. Thus, brand awareness effects product knowledge in memory and the ease with which customers recognize and recall the brand to a large extent.

C. Information Credibility

Credibility is described as the degree to which an individual evaluates their perception toward the information on the internet to be a reflection of reality such as the belief, fairness, accuracy,... [16]. Sundar & Nass's study [17] also complies with this finding that Credibility could affect audience's beliefs and attitudes in the process of the communicated content. The new media relating to new audiences requires credibility's definition to be updated to suit the new contexts and functions in communication [18]. Compared to the old media contexts, the concept of credibility in the online environment is much more complicated due to "multiplicity of sources embedded in the numerous layers of online dissemination of content".

Researcher from study [19] also suggested that credibility is not based on the intrinsic quality of the spreading of information or the source of the information, but depends on people who receive the information.

D. Traveling Decision

The new era of communication technologies has changed the ways that customers plan to their trip and consume

products related to traveling. The study of Clawson and Knetch presented five stage processes in their travel experience. First is the "anticipation stage". When customers attend in this stage, they are in the pre-travel process; they search the information about their trips and their destination. After having enough information, customers will plan and think whether getting that place in that tourism company. The second stage is traveling to the site. If the customers decide to get to the destination, the consideration is the mean of transportation. Next is the on-site behavior which including the some services such as accommodation, price of extra service, retails services and the relationship with other travelers. The fourth and fifth stages are going back home and recollect all the memory about the trip: what can you recall about the destination? Will you recognize this place when you see its picture or hear it from someone? Then you make a postpurchase evaluation phase which has a significant effect on your traveling intention next time. With the independent and dependent variables related to traveling decision mentioned above, this study hypothesizes that:

H_1: The impacts of viral marketing on Information Credibility.

H_2: The impact of Viral marketing on Brand Recall.

H_3: The impact of Viral marketing on Brand recognition

H_4: The direct impact of Viral marketing, Information credibility and Brand awareness on Traveling decision.

H_5: The indirect impact of Viral marketing, Information credibility and Brand awareness on Traveling decision.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Questionnaire Design and Data Collection

Quantitative approach was the main approach applied for this research. The Questionnaire was designed based on the major factors that the literature review mentioned to collect customers' responses. Using the Likert scale, the respondents were asked to indicate their importance from "Strongly disagree" (=1) to "strongly agree" (=5) related to viral marketing as well as specific questions regarding the five platforms we are studying.

Data collection: Based on the purpose of this research, the target sample of this research was people who have travelled to Thailand. Face-to-face survey and online questionnaire were mainly used to collect data for this research. Surveys were delivered at university, the zoo, the parks, shopping malls, etc. Besides, the surveys were conducted online by sending questionnaire link by email, Facebook to reach the final sample size of 215 cases.

B. Factor Analysis and Reliability

After examining the descriptive analysis on each items, principal component extraction method and varimax rotation of Factor analysis were conducted for 22 items of the group of dependent variables and 33 items of the group of independent variables related to Traveling decision to Thailand. Factor analysis was applied for independent variables and dependent variable seperatively. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy of dependent variables and independent variables were .898 and .848 respectively. The Bartlett's Test

of Sphericity value was also significant at .000 level for both group of independent variables and dependent variables. Therefore, this factor analysis for all items of these both groups was considered appropriate to conduct.

TABLE I: SUMMARY OF DEPENDENT VARIABLES WITH RELIABILITY COEFFICIENTS

Given Names	Number of Items	Alpha
1. Traveling decision (TRADECI)	7	.897
2. Information Credibility (INCREDIT)	7	.879
3. Brand Recall (BRARECA)	5	.831
4. Brand Recognition (BRARECO)	3	.706

Applying Kaiser's criterion to remove the components with eigenvalue lower than 1.0, the 22 items of four dependent variables which were shown in table I could explain 62.478% of total variance and Cronbach's coefficients ranged from .706 to .897 among the factors, indicating good subscale reliability. In addition, a seven factor solution provided the clearest extraction for the group of independent variables, including 33 items. These seven factors standed could explain 75.516% of total variance. According to Table II, the Cronbach's coefficients ranged from .671 to .759 among factors indicating good subscale reliability.

TABLE II: SUMMARY OF INDEPENDENT VARIABLES WITH RELIABILITY COEFFICIENTS

Given Names	Number of Items	Alpha
1. Use of Blog (BLOG)	5	.943
2. Use of Video (VIDEO)	6	.870
3. Use of Forum (FORUM)	5	.927
4. Use of Social Network (SOCINET)	4	.793
5. Information Achievement from Websites (WEBINACH)	3	.874
6. Information Sharing through Websites (WEBINSHA)	3	.845
7. Use of Email (EMAIL)	3	.834

TABLE III: CONSUMER PROFILES ($N = 215$)

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
- Male	90	41.9
- Female	125	58.1
Total	215	100.0
Relationship status		
- Single	142	66.0
- Married	73	34.0
Total	215	100.0
Age		
- 18-25 years old	99	46.0
- 26-35 years old	69	32.1
- 36-45 years old	36	16.7
- 46-55 years old	11	5.1
- Over 55 years old	0	0
Total	215	100.0
Income		
- Below 5 million VND	69	32.1
- 5-10 million VND	50	23.3
- 10-15 million VND	51	23.7
- 15-20 million VND	36	16.7
- 20-25 million VND	6	2.8
- Over 25 million VND	3	1.4
Total	215	100.0
Educational Level		
- Under high school	3	1.4
- High school	2	0.9
- Vocational Education	21	9.8
- University, college	145	67.4
- Postgraduate	44	20.5
Total	215	100.0

IV. RESULTS

A. Profile of Consumer Involved in the Study

Table III shows the customers profile of their Thailand trip. This supported to measure the representative of contributors.

B. Factors Affecting Traveling Decision

Pearson Product-moment Correlation Coefficients (r) were conducted in this study to deeply explore the interrelationship among a set of variables especially the impact on the dependent variable of traveling decision.

TABLE IV: CORRELATIONS BETWEEN VIRAL MARKETING AND TRAVEL DECISION

	TRADECI	1	2	3	4	5
1.BLOG	.094	1				
2.VIDEO	.245**	.183**	1			
3.FORUM	.050	.634**	.148*	1		
4.SOCINET	.161**	.202**	.228**	.220**	1	
5.WEBINACH	.186**	.213**	.351**	.292**	.126*	1
6.WEBINSHA	.148*	.062	.345**	.197**	.144*	.573**
7.EMAIL	.119*	.456**	.081	.483**	.101	.183**
Mean	**4.05**	**3.02**	**4.05**	**3.07**	**4.21**	**4.14**
SD.	**.680**	**1.069**	**.674**	**1.086**	**.652**	**.851**

Table IV and Table V show that there were positive significant correlations between the dependent variable, TRADECI and the independent variables: BRARECA (r=.433, $p<.01$), BRARECO (r=.415, $p<.01$), INCREDIT (r=.408, $p<.01$), VIDEO (r=.245, $p<.01$), WEBINACH (r=.186, $p<.01$), SOCINET (r=.161, $p<.01$), WEBINSHA (r=.148, $p<.05$), EMAIL (p=.119, $p<.05$). This indicates that a high level of BRARECA, BRARECO, INCREDIT, VIDEO, WEBINACH, SOCINET, WEBINSHA, EMAIL were associated with the high level of traveling decision (TRADECI).

TABLE V: CORRELATIONS BETWEEN INFORMATION CREDIBILITY, BRAND RECALL AND TRAVELING DECISION

	TRADECI	1	2
1. INCREDIT	.408**	1	
2. BRARECA	.433**	.394**	1
3. BRARECO	.415**	.476**	.580**
Mean	**4.05**	**3.62**	**3.85**
Std. Deviation	**.680**	**.612**	**.696**

According the results from multiple regression, the researcher explored which variables make significant unique contributions to predicting the dependent variables. Path analysis was employed in the next step of this study to explore the direct and indirect effects of traveling decision.

C. Direct Effects of Traveling Decision

Variables that affected directly on traveling decision included: BRARECA (β = .269, $p<.01$), INCREDIT (β = .231, $p<.01$) and WEBINACH (β =.158, $p <.05$). In other words, every 1- standard deviation increase in the BRARECA, INCREDIT and WEBINACH will yield an increase of a score of .269, .231 and .158 in the TRADECI while other variables are kept as constants.

D. Indirect Effects of Traveling Decision

As the Hypothesis 01 was conducted to investigate the impact of Viral marketing on Information credibility, there were three out of five forms of Viral marketing that influenced directly on INCREDIT: EMAIL (β=.171, $p<.05$), WEBINSHA (β=.227, $p<.01$), and SOCINET (β=.164, $p<.05$). Through INCREDIT, these three predictors made indirect impacts on the traveling decisions.

The second hypothesis questioned about the impact of Viral marketing on brand recall. From the results, it was concluded that there were three predictors played important roles in increasing the level of brand recall. They were VIDEO (β=.182, $p<.05$), SOCINET (β=.142, $p<.05$) and WEBINSHA (β=.174, $p<.05$). Through the intervening variable of Brand recall, these three predictors created indirect impacts on the traveling decision.

The third research question of this study asked "What is the impact of viral marketing on Brand Recognition?" After conducting the hypothesis 03, results showed that there was a modestly positive correlation between two forms of Viral Marketing (VIDEO and SOCINET) and Brand recognition. These independent variables which had β = .254, $p<.05$ and =.180, $p<.01$ respectively mainly affected on Brand recognition. However, the results show that there was no direct effect of the brand recognition on traveling decision. This means that through the intervening variable of brand recognition, none of the independent variables of viral marketing created an indirect effect on traveling decision. The final Traveling Decision model in this research is shown in Fig. 1.
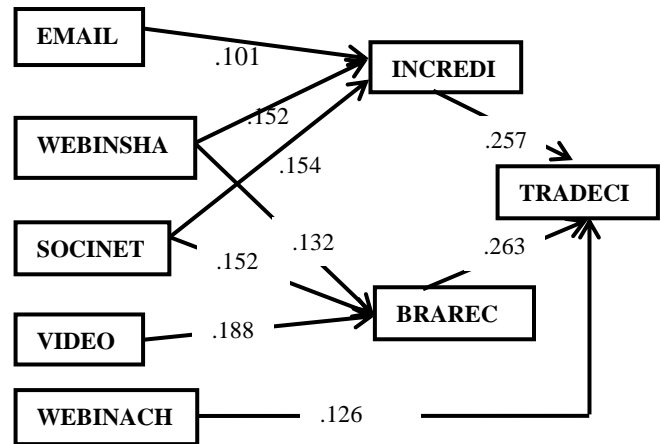

Fig. 1. Significant path coefficients of the traveling decision model.

E. Total Causal Effects of the Traveling Decision

TABLE VI: DIRECT, INDIRECT AND TOTAL CAUSAL EFFECT

Variables	Causal Effect		
	Direct	Indirect	Total
EMAIL	--	.026	.026
WEBINSHA	--	.074	.074
SOCINET	--	.080	.080
VIDEO	--	.049	.049
WEBINACH	.126	--	.126
INCREDIT	.257	--	.257
BRARECA	.263	--	.263
TOTAL	**.646**	**.229**	**.875**

According to Fig. 1 and Table VI, Brand recall affects Traveling decision the most (β = .263). The second strongest impact on Traveling decision is Information credibility (β = .257). Following behind are factors of Information Achievement from Websites (β = .126), Use of social network

(β = .08), Information Sharing through Websites (β = .074), Use of video (β = .049) and the last is the factors of Use of email with β = .026. The total effect of the factors affecting traveling decision was .875.

V. DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

A. Practical Implication and Contributions to Marketing

There are many benefits to be drawn from this study. Not only is a theory being generated, the practical implications, which marketing managers face within the tourism industry, can be targeted specifically. Thus it is bearing more insightful results. This will eventually help such professionals to increase the level of influence upon decision making in traveling. Understanding clearly which factors influence directly and indirectly on a traveling decision, the marketers can build suitable campaigns and concentrate on those important factors to increase sales. Therefore, this traveling decision model is useful to markers in practical situation.

According to the research of this study, INCREDIT and BRARECA made a positive contribution in the prediction of the TRADECI. It is consistent with some studies which indicated that the main concern of travelers when they use the travel information through the Internet is information credibility [20], [21] and the travelers' perceiving information credibility mostly influences on travel decisions of online users [22]. It means that the more customers that believe the information about a travel destination, the higher the chance of them choosing it as a destination to travel to. In addition, the quicker a customer recalls information on a certain traveling destination, there is a higher the chance of that destination being chosen.

This study also stated that through INCREDIT which directly affects traveling decision, three predictors including Email, Information sharing through Website and Social Network made indirect impacts on the travelers' decision. The statistic in Vina research (2013) [23] also showed that 30-year-old travelers accounting for 89.2 percent of total travelers are interested in online sharing activities and 52 percent of Facebook users are inspired to make their holiday choice and travel plans through their friends' photos [24]. Moreover, taking advantage of the development of Email communication, marketers could create a great opportunity for success within the tourism industry [25]. Hence, if the Marketers in the Tourism Industry want to increase the influence upon the customers' traveling decision, they must increase the level of information credibility through these types of internet channels.

Besides, it was concluded that there are three predictors played important roles in increasing the level of brand recall. They were VIDEO, SOCINET and WEBINSHA. In other words, using increased levels of videos, social networking and sharing more information through websites leads to a higher level of recalling a brand in a customers' mind. Therefore, the managers in tourism industry should encourage travelers to share their experiences, their reviews, their photos, videos about the destination for other travelers to access the opinions.

The result also showed that Information achievement from

Website plays as an important factor in affecting the customer decision directly in traveling. It means that the information that customers achieve from the website strongly motivate them to make decisions to go traveling. According to TripAdvisor (2011) which is considered as the leader of review websites about traveling, the number of users seeking for information and service for their trip is reached 50 million per month and the number of reviewing and giving opinions about traveling was more than 50 million. This statistic indicated the significant of marketing in determining the success of a tourism operator. It is considered as a fundamental activity that influence customers' decision fast and effectively. Therefore, it is important to notice to the information and image of the sites which is showed visibly to travelers. In other words, to improve the traveling decisions of a customer, it is necessary to build websites with valuable information which leads the customer be impressed and remembers the destination mentioned in websites.

B. Conclusion

It is concluded that only five forms of Viral Marketing have an impact to Customer's traveling decisions, namely: use of email, information sharing through website, use of social network, and use of video and information achievement from a website. In addition, only the information achievement form a website factor directly affects the decision making for HCM city customer. Even though the other four forms of Viral marketing do not directly affect the traveling decision, they have direct impacts on Information credibility and Brand recall factors, which are essential factors affecting traveling decision level.

Based on the results of this study, the tourism companies should pay more attention to Viral Marketing especially in forms that quickly affect the customer, such as Email, Social Networking, videos and websites. In addition, websites were divided into two aspects: sharing information and achieving information through websites in which information achievement had a closer relationship to traveling decisions. It was found that Marketers should focus on building valuable information in their websites. Information credibility is also a leading factor to traveling decisions. However, in order to create increased credibility in information, the Marketers should consider three elements affecting it. These are Email, Social Networking and sharing information through websites. Through Paying attention on these kinds of Viral Marketing, the quality of the information being shared to the customers is increased. Moreover, brand recall should be the main consideration of Tourism Marketers because it is one of the main factors to directly impact upon the evaluation of traveling decisions.

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