
Viral Marketing and Impulse Buying with the Mediating Effect of Online Trust: During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Yasindee Maheshika Liyanapathirana*

**Department of Pharmacology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Ruhuna,
Sri Lanka*

A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this study is to examine whether there is an impact of viral marketing on impulse buying with the mediating effect of online trust during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important to study the impact of viral marketing towards impulse buying via online trust during the pandemic as there is a lack of studies conducted about this phenomenon. Thus, the current study intends to fill that empirical gap as well as the contextual gap, since only a few research studies have been conducted in the Sri Lankan context. The research sample consists of 155 respondents and a questionnaire consisting of a five-point Likert scale had been distributed among online customers in order to collect primary data required for the research purpose. The data analysis was then carried out to examine the impact of viral marketing on impulse buying via the mediating effect of online trust using both SPSS and SmartPLS soft wares. Overall results suggested that viral marketing has a positive impact on online trust, online trust has a positive impact on impulse buying, viral marketing has a positive impact on impulse buying, and that there is a partial impact of online trust towards the relationship between viral marketing and impulse buying. Marketers can use the outcome of this study to obtain insights into customers and to develop effective marketing strategies.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, impulse buying, online trust, viral marketing

1. Introduction

Evaluating the external environment is a basic and one of the most important factors for any organization. The changes in the external environment can either be a threat or an opportunity for businesses for their survival in the market. The year 2020 was not just

*Corresponding author: yasindeemaheshika@gmail.com

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another year, but a start of a new era for every human being, which changed each and every aspect of their lives. The outbreak of covid19 in 2020 provided a revolutionary start for education, health, politics, and also for businesses. Covid19 pandemic changed the external environmental factors making it a challenge for businesses to adapt to the new situation. With the spread of the virus, governments, the Sri Lankan government, imposed new sets of rules and regulations, such as physical distancing, social distancing, and lockdown including.

The health measures imposed by governments heavily affected all the sectors: the way employees work (implementation of work from home concepts); closing down of kindergartens, schools, universities, and other higher education institutes (Influenced online schooling and online lectures); shopping and entertainment (shifted to online shopping and online entertainment methods); etc. Day to day life started to focus more on home and screen media connections (Pisot et al., 2021). Covid-19 has created a new normal era impacting the culture and economy of the society and it has developed a radical transformation in the traditional workplace moving it to home. Many organizations had to adopt new processes and practices influenced by social distancing to carry out their operations continuously (Leidner, 2020). They had to completely rethink their existing business models and ways of integrating digital systems for communication to embrace the effects of the pandemic (Carroll & Conboy, 2020). The spread of digital technology was not limited to the workplace, it also spread within society enhancing the communication between persons. People started utilizing digital platforms such as “zoom” and “team” for effective communication. These platforms have been useful for both personal and organizational purposes: to deliver meetings, education, training, and to maintain links with family members and friends (Kodam, 2020).

At present, with this pandemic situation, there is a trend of promoting products and services to reach a wider community and eventually go viral. Viral marketing is where users help businesses to distribute their marketing messages to other users (Abbas & Ali, 2020). Circulation of these messages by users not only spreads the message to the target audience but can encourage users to purchase their products. This kind of spontaneous purchasing is known as impulse buying. According to Khokar et al. (2019), one of the reasons for customers to buy impulsively during the pandemic is the influence of viral marketing activities carried out by marketers. Previous studies also suggested that viral marketing can affect this impulse buying behaviour (Abdullah & Artanti, 2021; Baker et al., 2019). The pandemic encouraged people to work from home and it caused them to depend on mobile phones to get day-to-day updates. Therefore, they had to scroll or surf for information more often. This is the point where marketers smoothly enter the online market, to build online communication with their customers leading them towards impulse purchases (Iriani et al., 2021). When customers make these impulse buying decisions, consumer trust affects their decisions (Khokar et al., 2019). Trust can be explained as a determinant of consumer online shopping behaviour (Wu et al., 2016).

Based on the above description the present study addresses two main research questions: is there an impact of viral marketing on driving impulse buying decisions, and what is the mediating effect of online trust on the relationship between viral marketing and impulse buying.

1.1. Statement of the problem

Viral marketing spreads the marketing messages as a virus among people and they are even willing to share these messages with their friends and family. It is difficult to prevent and control what people share; hence, it has become a powerful tool. Therefore, it is essential to understand the connection between viral marketing and customer buying behaviour to develop marketing value (Dufour, 2011). However, according to Palka et al. (2009) even though there are research studies that explored the effectiveness of viral marketing for businesses, there is less research regarding the attitudes and motivations about viral marketing for customers. Therefore, exploring the effect of viral marketing on impulse consumer behaviour is required. It is important to examine the impact of viral marketing on impulse buying, which is still an under-researched area, and carry out further investigations (Shahjehan, 2012; Lin, 2013). Thus the current study intends to analyze the impact of viral marketing on impulse buying. Meanwhile, trust can be evaluated as a factor that encourages consumer online shopping behaviour (Wu et al., 2016). According to Roy et al. (2020), the customers who depended on non-traditional media are now making decisions based on online reviews. Yet, all the comments and reviews on social media platforms are not reliable and among them, positive comments will generate trust about the products (Bulut & Karabulut, 2018). Trust minimizes the perceived risk (Handi et al., 2018; Harridge, 2006), which in the end enhances the consumers' intention to purchase (Bulut & Karabulut, 2018; Fang et al., 2014; Limbu Yam et al., 2012; Seo et al., 2020). Unless customers have confidence in the marketer or product, purchases will not be generated. When customers purchase products impulsively, those decisions depend on their feelings and emotions. At this moment trust positively impacts impulsive buying (Wu et al., 2016). Only a few research studies have examined the role of trust in impulsive buying (Chen et al., 2019). Therefore, this study makes an attempt to determine the mediating effect of trust in viral marketing and impulse buying to expand the knowledge regarding this concept.

Current research studies about customers' shopping behaviour indicate that people have started to shift from physical activities to online activities (Dannenbergh, 2020; Al, 2020). The demand for essential goods, such as food, groceries, and healthcare are increasing with the Covid-19 pandemic, impacting the retail industry significantly. Customers are getting accustomed to new behaviours, new ways of shopping. It is said that some of these new behaviours might become the new normal; for example, online shopping with home delivery is becoming a common practice (Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020). With this pandemic, the tendency of consumers to move online is faster than organizations predict. It has increased the frequency of online purchasing, digital consumption, and the average size of online baskets than before. They have started purchasing online in record numbers. A study conducted using South East Asian countries has reported that 47% of customers have reduced offline spending, while 30% increased online purchasing (Yendamuri & Vohra, 2020). Consumer purchases are based on behavioural reactions to stress or uncertainty. An American survey has revealed that Covid-19 has made consumers purchase more impulsively than before the pandemic. Further, it has been recognized that shopping can change the mood of customers during the pandemic (Slickdeals, 2020). In Indonesia also, customers are impulsive when engaging in online shopping. The reason for their impulsive behaviour is the offers and programmes carried out by online stores. Moreover, the benefits, such as cost, time, and energy-saving influence customers to buy impulsively (Amanah & Harahap, 2020). Thus, academic research studies should attempt to explore the impacts of the pandemic on

consumer behaviour and deliver insights to retailers into how to adapt to the changes (Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020). Further, it says that Covid-19 won't come to an end until 60-70% of the human population is immune and it will take about 18-24 months (Woodward, 2020). The researcher strives to investigate the consumer impulse behaviour during the covid-19 pandemic to understand the variations in the consumer behaviour which will be valuable in the near future too as the pandemic will exist for another few years.

2. Literature review

2.1. Impulse buying

The definitions of impulse buying were focused only on the product earlier, before the research studies of Rook (1987). The studies prior to Rook did not consider consumers and their personal traits as a factor influencing impulse purchases (Muruganantham & Bhakat, 2013). Rook (1987) stated that "impulse buying occurs when a consumer experiences a sudden, often powerful and persistent urge to buy something immediately. The impulse to buy is hedonically complex and may stimulate emotional conflict. Also, impulse buying is prone to occur with diminished regard for its consequences". In 1998, Beatty and Ferrell argued that impulse buying refers to the purchases consumers carry out immediately without any pre-shopping intention to purchase a particular product or to satisfy a specific need.

The rise of information and communication technology has contributed to the growth of e-commerce. As a result, online impulse buying has become a significant attribute. It is calculated that nearly 40% of all online consumer expenditure is generated through online impulse buying (Liu, Li, & Hu, 2013). Extant literature argues that the online shopping environment is more open to impulse buying behaviour than offline shopping as the online environment is free of constraints, such as inconvenient store locations, limited operating hours, and social pressure from staff and other consumers that they might experience during physical shopping activities (Eroglu et al., 2001).

Recent research studies explain that online impulse buying has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic (Scacchi, 2021; Harahap, 2021). The reason behind this is people spending more time on e-commerce websites, online advertisements, social networking sites, etc. According to Dr. Sheetal Jindal, a psychologist and consumer behaviour analyst there is a difference between panic buying and impulse buying during the lockdown. He illustrates panic buying as customers purchasing essentials with the fear and uncertainty regarding when shops will be open next. However, impulse buying is where they purchase non-essential items due to the fear of uncertainty (Thakur et al., 2020).

2.2. Viral marketing

The viral marketing concept was derived, based on the hypothesis that customers always tend to communicate with their friends and relatives about the organization's products or services, which make them satisfied¹. According to Palka et al. (2009), the term Viral is explained as "a type of marketing in which advertising messages are spread from one customer to others like a spread of a flu virus". Kim and Lowrey (2010) also stated that viral marketing is a "marketing tool or marketing phenomenon to encourage and urge people to share messages". Viral marketing is also known as word-of-mouth or buzz marketing, and it is basically about consumers sharing information with each other (Kozinets et al., 2010). Viral marketing or viral advertising is a business strategy that uses existing social networks to promote a

product. Its name refers to how consumers spread information about a product with other people, much in the same way that a virus spreads from one person to another (Abbas et al., 2010).

The widespread use of the internet and social media has enhanced the sharing of viral messages in the form of memes, shares, likes, and forwards (Ho & Dempsey, 2010). At present, mostly viral marketing is generated through memes sharing on social media and the reason for this popularity is because they resonate with people; for instance, memes such as Baby Yoda or Ok boomer can be seen in many of the social feeds, which make them go viral (Barnhart, 2020). Viral marketing is emphasized more on digital media platforms and Facebook can be given as one of the best social networking sites for this purpose. (Facebook, 2018). In Facebook, if a user shares a post it appears as a non-commercial post in the Facebook newsfeed of their friends. Therefore, organizations have paid more attention to these social networking sites since customers share information impulsively on these sites about their brands than on paid media (American Marketing Association, 2017).

Viral marketing is useful in times of a crisis and currently, we are experiencing the importance of it as we are in the midst of the Covid19 pandemic. This assists companies to maintain their continuity in providing their products and services to their customers. Covid19 pandemic highly encouraged the use of digital content in both production and consumption. Contrary to the real coronavirus, which is harmful, online viruses can either be positive or negative to the organizations. More than ever, firms need to analyze the dynamics of online content and conversations to develop outstanding consumer engagement strategies. Companies need to understand the dynamics of online conversations to create successful consumer engagement strategies (Iriani et al., 2021).

2.3. Online trust

In the corporate world, trust is considered to be a significant factor for a stable and collaborative relationship. Researchers have identified that trust is essential for developing and maintaining long-term relationships (Rousseau et al., 1998). Trust is a major factor that defines the success of E-commerce platforms (Holsapple & Sasidharan, 2005). With the development of internet technology, trust has been a problem for people to engage in online transactions. 80% of the users say trust in a website is very important in making an online decision (Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2002). Because of the uncertainty in the online space, building up trust is vital; and on the other hand, it is the most difficult task to do compared to a face-to-face situation (Pavlou et al., 2007; Riegelsberger et al., 2005).

The B2C e-commerce context does not involve a simultaneous transaction of goods and money. There, the supplier and customer will be totally different from each other in terms of the country, time zone, currency, and legal system. Further, customers are required to share their personal information, such as contact number, e-mail address, and financial information (credit card numbers). Therefore, developing trust is important under the conditions of uncertainty and risk. Lack of trust has been recognized as a major reason for consumers to refuse online purchasing from internet shops. Trust assists customers to manage the perceived risk and uncertainty, and they will engage in trust-related behaviours (McKnight & Chervany, 2001).

The hypothesized relationships are depicted in conceptual framework (Figure 1).

2.4. Operationalization

Table 1: Operationalization Table

Variable	Construct	Source
Viral Marketing (VM)	I follow every product promotion on social media during the Covid 19 pandemic	Ho & Dempsey (2010)
	I monitor every information shared by members of social media groups during the Covid-19 pandemic	
Online Trust (OT)	I forward product promotional information receive from other people to my social media groups	Khoa (2020)
	I always talk positively about product promotions on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic	
	I hope other people are interested in the product promotion information that I pass on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic	
	I spread positive information on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic	
	I believe merchants on social media can fulfill people's needs	
Impulse Buying (IB)	I believe merchants on social media sell products honestly	Bozaci (2020)
	I believe product information on social media matches the real conditions	
	I believe in the safety of the product being sold according to health protocols	
	I believe traders are able to meet every need of society during the Covid-19 pandemic	
	I don't consider the risks of shopping on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic	
	I shop on social media according to my feelings during the Covid-19 pandemic	
	I didn't have any plans to spend on social media before the Covid-19 pandemic	
I shop for products on social media which are not really a necessity during the Covid-19 pandemic		
I shop for products on social media which are usually not bought during the Covid-19 pandemic		
I shop on social media for no clear reason during the Covid-19 pandemic		

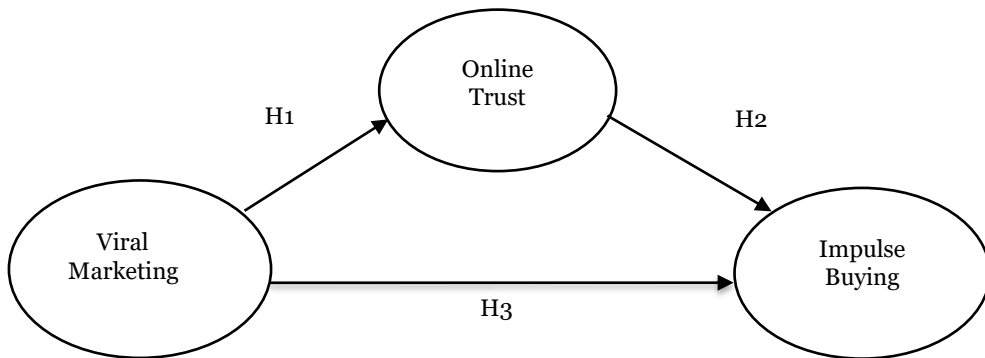


Figure 1:Conceptual Framework

2.5. Hypotheses

Palka et al. (2009) in their study has identified that risk and trust are effective factors for the success of viral marketing, especially in the stage of opening the messages. Another study discusses that consumers trust their friends' recommendations and they believe their close ones have their best interest. Marketers have taken financial advantage of this opportunity (Sormunen, 2009). Susilowati and Bafadhhal (2019) stated that viral marketing has a positive significant effect on trust. At present with the pandemic, customers have shifted towards online shopping; thus, viral messages shared by their close ones will be easily accepted and trusted (Iriani et al., 2021). Based on this literature the following hypotheses can be formulated.

H1: Viral marketing has a positive impact on online trust in the covid-19 pandemic era.

Trust is a psychological factor that influences consumer purchasing decisions. When trust is developed consumers will engage in purchasing activities (Susilowati & Bafadhhal, 2019). According to Iriani et al. (2021), the trust generated through social media has a positive and significant impact on the impulse buying of customers. Further, studies conducted by Khokar et al. (2019) also revealed that there is a significant relationship between trust and impulse buying. Thus, the following hypothesis can be created.

H2: Online trust has a positive impact on impulse buying in the covid-19 pandemic era.

Viral Marketing is a strategy involving digital content that has the ability to create rapid growth in a short time. The previous research studies confirmed that there is a positive relationship between viral marketing and impulse buying (Abdullah & Artanti,2021; Baker et al.,2019; Khokar et al., 2019; Husnain et al.,2016).

H3: Viral marketing has a positive impact on impulse buying in the covid-19 pandemic era.

Viral marketing provides new directions to people's thoughts and views about any condition; especially, during an epidemic outbreak. Nowadays, the top trend is COVID-19 epidemic conditions discussed on the news and online social websites (Ammar et al., 2020). Social media users receive a large amount of product information because of their daily usage of social networks. Therefore, viral marketing influences impulsive purchase desires in consumers. Accordingly, empirical research studies have also confirmed that widely spread information on social media networks has a positive impact on impulsive purchases (Khokhar et al., 2019). Since the quantity of sharing information is high during the pandemic, trust is a factor that triggers the effectiveness of viral marketing; thus, it can generate a mediating effect (Iriani et al., 2021). This can be hypothesized as:

H4: Online trust mediates the relationship between viral marketing and impulse buying.

3. Research methodology

The researcher has used the PLS-SEM to analyze the data of the study. PLS-SEM can be applied with smaller samples, and it is a valuable method for social media analytics (Sarstedt et al., 2017). "PLS-SEM is described as suitable to measure social media data, typically focused on prediction, relying on complex models with little theoretical substantiation" (Stieglitz et al., 2014). Considering the above PLS-SEM was used since the study consists of a small sample size and is related to social media analytics.

The population of the study consisted of online retail customers in Sri Lanka and the sample size was 155 respondents. The researcher developed the questionnaire in a Google form and distributed them through social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and Whatsapp) to the respondents. A total of 170 questionnaires were delivered, but only 155 were acceptable, recording a response rate of 91%. The measurement scale in this study used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). Snowball sampling was used as the sampling technique as respondents were requested to pass the questionnaire to others.

4. Data analysis

4.1. Demographic analysis

Out of the 155 respondents, 64% were female and 36% were male. 54% of the respondents were between the ages 19-29, while the percentages of age 29-39, 40-50, and above 50 were 30.7%, 10.7%, and 4.7% respectively. Most of the respondents were employees, (72.6%) and only 24% were students. 84.7% of the respondents engage, 1-3 times in online shopping during a month. With regard to the product category, 36% purchase food and beverages online, followed by healthcare (32.6%), fashion (13.3%), beauty care (12.6%), and electronic, house and kitchenware (5.3%).

VM1 and OT2 were removed as their values were below 0.4 (Hair et al., 2013) and VM4, IB3, and IB5 recorded 0.486, 0.529, and 0.598 respectively. A loading relevance test was performed to determine whether to retain these three items, and it was decided to remove them since their elimination increased the AVE and Composite reliability values.

Table 2: Indicator Reliability

Item	Outer Loading
VM2	0.784
VM3	0.814
VM5	0.832
VM6	0.901
OT1	0.826
OT3	0.793
OT4	0.883
OT5	0.801
IB1	0.897
IB2	0.905
IB4	0.868
IB6	0.884

Source: Survey Data, 2021

4.2. Internal consistency reliability and validity

Table 3: Reliability And Validity

	CA	CR	AVE	IB	OT	VM
IB	0.880	0.911	0.632	0.795		
OT	0.807	0.868	0.571	0.680	0.755	
VM	0.856	0.896	0.634	0.558	0.554	0.796

Source: Survey Data, 2021

CA: Cronbach's Alpha, CR: Composite Reliability, AVE: Average Variance Extracted

Cronbach's alpha is a popular estimate for measuring internal consistency. An acceptable reliability score is 0.7 and higher (Heale & Twycross, 2015). Further, when using SmarPLS to calculate data, Composite Reliability is more accurate to measure the internal consistency of the model. According to Bagozzi and Yi (1988), a threshold level of 0.6 or higher is required to demonstrate satisfactory composite reliability. The current study indicates a Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.7 and Composite Reliability greater than 0.6. Thus, this study has achieved internal consistency. It is suggested if the AVE (Average Variance Extracted) is greater than 0.5, composite reliability exceeds 0.7, and standardized factor loadings of the individual item in their respective construct exceeds 0.6, the measurement mode has achieved the convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Therefore, this study has established convergent validity. Fornell and Larcker (1981) showed that the square root of the AVE of each latent variable should be higher than the latent variable correlations to prove discriminant validity. According to the results of the table below diagonals (bolded) represent the square root of the AVE, while the off diagonals are correlations among constructs. The square root of the AVE of every latent variable is higher than the correlations of the latent variables. Thus, it can be concluded that the researcher was able to achieve discriminant validity successfully.

4.3. Coefficient of determination/R square

According to the generated results, there is a 51% impact from viral marketing on online trust, while there is only 30.7% impact from the online trust on impulse buying. However, both values are acceptable as the required minimum value to determine R-Square is 0.25 (Hair et al., 2011).

Table 4: R-Square

	R-Square	Adjusted R-Square
IB	0.510	0.503
OT	0.307	0.303

Source: Survey Data, 2021

4.4. Path coefficient

As all the t values are greater than 1.96 and all the p values are less than 0.05, H1, H2, and H3 can be accepted.

Table 5: Path Coefficient

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficients	t values	p values	Accepted/Rejected
H ₁	VM->OT	0.554	7.009	0.000	Accepted
H ₂	OT->IB	0.538	8.195	0.000	Accepted
H ₃	VM->IB	0.259	2.936	0.003	Accepted

Source: Survey Data, 2021

4.5. Mediation analysis

The results show that Viral Marketing positively predicts the impulse buying of customers during the Covid-19 pandemic; (Total effect-path coe.=0.557, p=0.000). Analyzing the indirect effects, results revealed that online trust significantly mediates the relationship between viral marketing and impulse buying (indirect effect-path coe=0.298,p=0.000). According to Hair et al.(2013), partial mediation is demonstrated when VAF exceeds the 0.2 level and when it exceeds 0.8 it is a full mediation. Therefore, this study shows a partial mediation as the VAF value is greater than 0.2 (VAF=0.535). This means 53.5% of viral marketing impact on impulse buying can be explained by online trust. Thus, the H₄ (online trust mediates the relationship between viral marketing and impulse buying) can be accepted.

Table 6: Mediation Analysis

Effects	Path Coefficients	t value	p value	VAF
Direct Effect VM->IB (with mediator)	0.259	2.937	0.003	
Indirect Effect (0.554*0.538)VM->OT >IB	0.298	5.375	0.000	
Total Effect VM->IB (without mediator)	0.557	7.606	0.000	
VAF (Indirect Effect/ Total Effect)				0.535

Source: Survey Data, 2021

5. Discussion and implications

According to the results, viral marketing has a positive impact on impulse buying during the covid-19 pandemic era. This complies with the existing literature, which stated viral marketing positively impacts impulse buying (Abdullah & Artanti,2021; Baker et al.,2019; Khokar et al., 2019; Husnain et al.,2016). Further, the current study confirmed that there is a positive impact from viral marketing on online trust and online trust on impulse buying, agreeing with the previous research findings (Susilowati & Bafadhal, 2019; Iriani et al., 2021). The researcher has examined that online trust acts as a mediator between viral marketing and

impulse buying and this is consistent with the findings of Khokhar et al. (2019) and Iriani et al. (2021).

There are several theoretical implications resulting from this study. First, even though there are studies about the effective application of viral marketing by businesses, there is a lack of studies about its impact on consumer behaviours, such as impulse buying. The present study satisfactorily demonstrates the relationship between viral marketing and impulse buying, highlighting that viral marketing has a significant positive impact on impulse buying. Second, in previous research studies, they have rarely explained the mediating role of trust between viral marketing and impulse buying. Hence, the researcher has added online trust as a mediator and it was discovered that online trust partially mediates the relationship between viral marketing and impulse buying. The study brings a comprehensive interpretation on how to encourage impulse purchases utilizing viral marketing and online trust.

The following practical implications can also be derived from the present study. Viral marketing is all about generating an e-word of mouth about a company's product among the community. During the pandemic, the right viral marketing strategies will stimulate the customer's impulsive buying. Therefore, marketers should invest more in marketing during the pandemic if they want to survive in the market. They can expand the content on their website and add additional resources to make it convenient for customers to get information. Moreover, they can improve email marketing, pay-per-click campaigns, and become active in social media. Using real-time data to understand customer needs, personalizing digital communications, and tracking the campaigns can enhance viral marketing. Marketers have to focus more on implementing viral marketing for essential products as customers are likely to engage in impulse buying for essential items during a pandemic.

Further, marketers advertised their products and services heavily through social media during the pandemic. It was because these platforms allowed them to interact with their customers even if they do not have the ability to meet in a physical environment. Likewise, they can further utilize social media to stimulate the consumer's emotions and feelings by providing them images, videos, audios, testimonials, etc. related to their products and services. Further, they can create online content, information about their offers and display their products in attractive ways to reach their prospects and customers. When they engage in these activities it creates confidence in the public about their offerings, and they start to spread the company's marketing message. Ultimately, when this information is shared by a close circle of friends, people will trust the message.

Online trust will increase the stimuli of impulse buying due to the value they offer to customers. Especially during the pandemic, they have to depend mostly on online shopping. If the marketers can ensure the products sold are free of Covid-19 and they are of good quality, it will generate a higher level of public trust. Then the level of impulse buying will also increase. Therefore, marketers should focus on building trust among consumers during the pandemic to stimulate impulse buying.

6. Conclusion

During a pandemic spread of information in society cannot be prevented. A lot of information regarding products, services, and health is shared among the community at a higher rate. This can be observed with the current Covid-19 pandemic situation, both the customers and marketers highly utilize digital media platforms to spread their messages. Marketers have a great opportunity of increasing consumers' purchasing potential if they efficiently use viral marketing strategies during the pandemic. Yet, with the pandemic, it may need a mediator to enhance this ability, like online trust, which partially impacts as discussed in the present study. This paper successfully examined that viral marketing has a positive impact on impulse buying, viral marketing has a positive impact on online trust, online trust has a positive impact on impulse buying, and viral marketing has an impact on impulse buying through online trust in the covid-19 pandemic era.

6.1. Limitations and future research

Despite the valuable findings, the study has several limitations. The study has used snowball sampling to collect data from the respondents using social media platforms. Previous literature suggests snowball sampling as a biased sampling technique as it is not random and it selects individuals on the basis of social networks (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). Therefore, future research can be conducted using other sampling methods to reduce the biases. Next, the sample size was limited to 155 due to time constraints and a larger sample can increase the statistical power and offer rigorous findings (Hair et al., 2010). In the future, the researchers can expand this study into a multi-group analysis to investigate the effects of different age or income groups which will provide a better insight into the concept. Further, the current study was carried out amidst a pandemic (Covid-19); hence, the researcher suggests applying it in a normal condition.

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