
Viral Marketing and Impulse Buying: The Role of Online Trust in a Pandemic

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine whether there is an impact from viral marketing on impulse buying with the mediating effect of online trust during the Covid-19 pandemic. A questionnaire with a five-point likert scale was circulated among online customers to collect primary data for the research objective, and the research sample consists of 155 respondents. The data were subsequently analyzed with the help of SPSS and SmartPLS software. Overall, the findings indicated that viral marketing has a positive impact on online trust, that online trust has a positive impact on impulse buying, that viral marketing has a positive impact on impulse buying, and that there is a partial mediation of online trust in the relationship between viral marketing and impulse buying. Theoretically, the study contributes by looking at the relationship between viral marketing and impulse buying, as well as the mediating influence of trust on viral marketing and impulse buying. Marketers can utilize the findings of this research to learn more about their customers and design more effective marketing tactics.

Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic, Impulse Buying, Online Trust, Viral Marketing

Introduction

Evaluating the external environment is a fundamental and crucial aspect of any company. Changes in the external environment can be a threat or an opportunity for firms to stay afloat in the marketplace. 2020 was not simply another year for humans, but the beginning of a new age that changed every element of their life. Covid-19's outbreak in 2020 represented a turning point in education, health, politics, and business. Because of the Covid-19 epidemic, external environmental conditions have altered, making it difficult for enterprises to adjust to the new circumstances. With the spread of the virus, governments,

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particularly the Sri Lankan government, implemented new rules and regulations such as physical separation, social distancing, and lockdown.

Government-imposed health measures had a significant impact on all sectors, including employee operations (implementation of work-from-home concepts), the closure of kindergartens, schools, universities, and other higher educational institutions (influenced online schooling and online lectures), shopping and entertainment (shifted to online shopping and entertainment methods), and so on. Day-to-day life began to place a greater emphasis on home and screen media links (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. (Leidner, 2020). To cope with the pandemic's impacts, they must radically rethink their old business structures and ways of integrating digital communication technologies (Carroll & Conboy, 2020). The spread of digital technology was not only limited to the workplace but also within society enhancing the communication between each other. People started utilizing digital platforms such as "zoom" and "teams" for effective communication. These platforms have shown to be effective for both personal and organizational needs, including conducting meetings, educational purposes, training, and maintaining relationships with family and friends (Kodam, 2020). When considering online buying platforms, amazon, e-bay, rakuten, aliexpress and Walmart can be regarded as some of the top-ranked sites in the world (SimilarWeb, 2021).

Due to the pandemic, there is currently a tendency of advertising products and services to reach a larger audience and finally go viral. When consumers assist firms in spreading their marketing message to other users, this is known as viral marketing (Abbas & Ali, 2020). People's distribution of these messages not only spreads the message to the intended audience, but also encourages users to buy their items. 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 further suggested that viral marketing can affect this impulse buying behavior (Abdullah & Artanti, 2021; Baker et al., 2019). The pandemic encouraged people to work from home causing them to depend on mobile phones to get daily updates. Therefore, they had to scroll or surf for information more often. It is the time at which marketers effortlessly join the online market in order to establish an online relationship with their customers that leads to impulse purchases (Iriani et al., 2021). When clients make these spontaneous purchases, their decisions are influenced by their level of trust (Khokar et al., 2019). Consumers' online purchase behavior is influenced by their level of trust (Wu et al., 2016).

Based on the above account, the following study addresses two main research questions as; What factors predict the impulse buying and what is the role of trust in the relationship between viral marketing and impulse buying.

Research Problem

Viral marketing distributes marketing messages like a virus, and consumers are even willing to share them with their friends and relatives. Because it is difficult to prohibit and control what people post, social media has evolved into a powerful instrument. To build marketing value, it's crucial to grasp the link between viral marketing and client buying behavior (Dufour, 2011). However, even though numerous research studies have examined the effectiveness of viral marketing for businesses, less research has been conducted regarding the attitudes and motivations about viral marketing for customers (Gunawan and Huarng, 2015; Liu and Wang, 2019). As a result, research on the impact of viral marketing on impulse purchases is required. It is critical to investigate the impact of viral marketing on impulse purchases, as this is an area that is still under-researched and requires more research (Shahjehan, 2012; Lin, 2013). As a result, the current research aims to determine the relationship between viral marketing and impulse purchases. 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 are dependent 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 reduces perceived risk (Handi et al., 2018; Harridge, 2006), which increases the likelihood of a purchase (Handi et al., 2018; Harridge, 2006). (Bulut & Karabulut, 2018; Fang et al., 2014; Limbu Yam et al., 2012; Seo et al., 2020). Customers will not buy until they have faith in the marketer or the product. When clients make impulsive purchases, their decisions are influenced by their moods and emotions. Only a few studies have looked into the role of trust in impulsive purchases (Chen et al., 2019). Therefore this study attempts to determine the mediating effect of trust in viral marketing and impulse buying to expand the knowledge regarding this concept.

According to recent study studies on client shopping behavior, people have begun to transit from physical to online activities (Dannenberg, 2020; Al, 2020). The demand for vital commodities such as food, groceries, and healthcare is increasing as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has a substantial impact on the retailing industry. Customers are getting accustomed to new behaviors, new ways of shopping and it is said that some of these new behaviors 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 moving towards online is faster than organizations predict (Armando, 2020). It has increased the frequency of online purchase, digital consumption, and the average size of online baskets than before. The masses have started purchasing online in record numbers. According to a study done in Southeast Asian countries, 47 percent of clients have cut their offline spending while 30 percent have boosted their online purchases (Yendamuri & Vohra, 2020). Consumer purchases are based on how they react to stress or uncertainty in their lives. According to an American survey, Covid-19 has caused customers to buy more impulsively than before the outbreak.

Furthermore, it has been established that shopping can alter client moods during a pandemic (Slickdeals, 2020). In Indonesia, the customers are impulsive when engaging in online shopping. The reason for their impulsive behavior is the offers and programs carried out by online stores. Moreover, 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 about how to adapt with the changes (Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020).

Furthermore, with the shift to internet shopping, it is critical to investigate consumer behaviours such as impulse buying in the Sri Lankan setting. Young people in India and Bangladesh are very interested in the internet and the internet-based purchasing (Rahman et al., 2018; Mathew, 2016). Sri Lankan consumers are also active on Facebook and Youtube. According to Kemp (2021) the number of social media users in Sri Lanka is 36.8% of the overall population. Even though the South Asians are very active on the internet, online impulsive purchase is not popular in South Asia as it is in the United States, United Kingdom, Europe and Japan (Rahman et al., 2018). To address the aforementioned contextual gap, the current read will investigate impulsive buying behavior among Sri Lankan consumers.

Further, it is assumed that Covid-19 will not 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 as well as the pandemic will exist for another few years.

Literature Review

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 consumer and his 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 some-thing immediately. The impulse to buy is hedonically complex and may stimulate emotional conflict. In addition, 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 50% of all online consumer expenditure is generated through online impulse buying (Zheng et al., 2019) and according to Nielsen (2017) there is a 5% of

more chance for online impulse buying compared to offline. Extant literature argues that the online shopping environment is more open to impulse buying behavior 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 is people spend more time on e-commerce websites, online advertisements, social networking sites, etc. According to Dr. Sheetal Jindal, a psychologist, and consumer behavior 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 when shops will be open next whereas impulse buying is when they purchase non-essential items due to the fear of uncertainty (Thakur et al., 2020).

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 satisfied. According to Palka et al. (2009), the term Viral 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 known as word-of-mouth or buzz marketing as well 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 have enhanced the sharing of viral messages in the form of memes, shares, likes and forwards (Ho & Dempsey, 2010). At present, viral marketing is mostly 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 illustrated 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 them about their brands than on paid media (American Marketing Association, 2017).

Viral marketing is useful in times of crisis and currently, we are experiencing the importance of it as we are in the midst of Covid19 pandemic. It assists companies to maintain

continuity in providing their products and services to their customers. Covid-19 pandemic highly encouraged the use of digital content in both production and consumption. Contrary to the real coronavirus, which is malevolent, 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).

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). Along with the development of internet technology, trust has been a hindrance for people to engage in online transactions. 80% of users state, trust in a website is very important in making an online decision (Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2002). Due to the uncertainty in online space, building up trust is vital and on the other hand, it is the most difficult task to do than in a face-to-face situation (Pavlou et al., 2007; Riegelsberger et al., 2005).

In the B2C e-commerce context, it does not involve a simultaneous transaction of goods and money. According to it, the supplier and customer will be 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). Hence, 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 behaviors (McKnight & Chervany, 2001).

Study Design and Methods

PLS-SEM can be used to forecast key target constructions or identify key "driver" constructs, according to Hair et al. (2011). One of the goals of this research is to figure out what elements influence consumers' impulse purchase behavior. As a result, PLS-SEM was employed to analyze the data in the current study by the researcher. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the study.

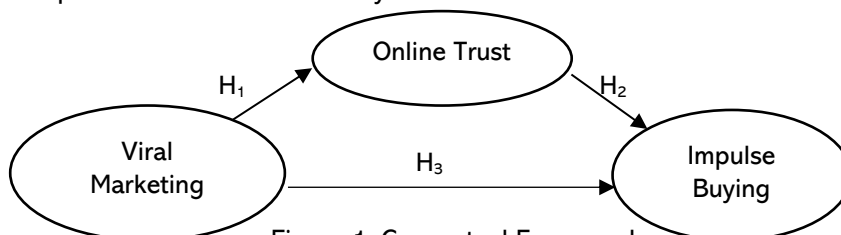


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The study constructs and the variables of each study construct are given in Table 1.

Table I: Study Constructs and Variables

Construct	Variables	Source
Viral Marketing (VM)	<p>VM1: I follow every product promotion on social media during the Covid 19 pandemic</p> <p>VM2: I monitor every information shared by members of social media groups during the Covid-19 pandemic</p> <p>VM3: I forward product promotional information receive from other people to my social media groups (VM 3)</p> <p>VM4: I always talk positively about product promotions on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic</p> <p>VM5: I hope other people are interested in the product promotion information that I share on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic</p> <p>VM6: I spread positive information on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic</p>	Ho and Dempsey (2010)
Online Trust (OT)	<p>OT1: I believe merchants on social media can fulfill people's needs</p> <p>OT2: I believe merchants on social media sell products honestly</p> <p>OT3: I believe product information on social media matches the real conditions</p> <p>OT4: I believe in the safety of the product being sold according to health protocols</p> <p>OT5: I believe traders can meet every need of society during the Covid-19 pandemic</p>	Khoa (2020)
Impulse Buying (IB)	<p>IB1: I don't consider the risks of shopping on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic</p> <p>IB2: I shop on social media according to my feelings during the Covid-19 pandemic</p> <p>IB3: I didn't have any plans to spend on social media before the Covid-19 pandemic</p> <p>IB4: I shop for products on social media which are not a necessity during the Covid-19 pandemic</p> <p>IB5: I shop for products on social media which are usually not bought during the Covid-19 pandemic</p> <p>IB6: I shop on social media for no clear reason during the Covid-19 pandemic</p>	Bozaci (2020)

The study's population is Sri Lankan online retail buyers, and the sample size was 155 people. The questionnaire was created in English using Google Forms and distributed to respondents using social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and Whatsapp). A total of 170 questionnaires were sent out, but only 155 were accepted, resulting in a 91 percent response rate. This survey used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree) (strongly disagree). The sampling technique was snowball sampling, in which respondents were asked to pass the questionnaire on to others.

Palka et al. (2009) discovered that risk and trust are important elements in the success of viral marketing, particularly at the stage of message opening. Consumers trust their friends' suggestions, and they believe their close friends have their best interests at heart, according to another survey. Marketers have benefited financially from this chance (Sormunen, 2009). According to Susilowati and Bafadhal (2019), viral marketing has a strong beneficial effect on trust. Customers have migrated to internet buying as a result of the epidemic, thus viral communications sent by their friends and family will be easily accepted and trusted (Iriani et al., 2021). The following hypotheses can be made based on this material.

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 & Bafadhal, 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 achieved.

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 is a type of communication, and impulse purchase intention denotes the intention to buy something (Chen & Wang, 2016). According to Mukherjee and Nath (2007), trust works as a mediator variable in the relationship between communication and behavior intentions in the online world. Pratama et al. (2017) have pointed out that there is a mediating effect of trust between social existence and buying intent. According to a study conducted by Iriani et al. (2021), trust acts as a mediator between viral marketing

and impulse purchase. The following hypothesis has been established based on the studies mentioned above:

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

Data Analysis

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 which were 72.6% and only 24% were students. 84.7% of the respondents engage, 1-3 times in online shopping during a month. Concerning 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%).

Indicator Reliability

Indicator Reliability values are reported in Table 2. Accordingly, 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 decided to remove them since their elimination increased the AVE and Composite reliability values.

Table 2: Indicator Reliability

Item	Outer Loading	Indicator Reliability
VM2	0.784	0.614
VM3	0.814	0.662
VM5	0.832	0.692
VM6	0.901	0.811
OT1	0.826	0.682
OT3	0.793	0.628
OT4	0.883	0.779
OT5	0.801	0.641
IB1	0.897	0.804
IB2	0.905	0.819
IB4	0.868	0.753
IB6	0.884	0.781

Source: Survey Data, 2021

Internal Consistency Reliability and Validity

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 (Table 3).

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, that the measurement mode has achieved the convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Therefore this study has established convergent validity.

Further, discriminant validity was verified using Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) where the values should be less than 0.9 (Henseler et al., 2015). As all the HTMT values are below the threshold level;0.9 the study has achieved discriminant validity.

Table 3: Reliability and Validity

Construct	CA	CR	AVE	HTMT	
				IB	OT
IB	0.880	0.911	0.632	-	-
OT	0.807	0.868	0.571	0.507	-
VM	0.856	0.896	0.634	0.615	0.619

Source: Survey Data, 2021

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

VIF Values

The threshold level of Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) is considered as the VIF value to be of 5 or lower (i.e., the tolerance level of 0.2 or higher) to avoid the collinearity problem (Hair et al., 2011). According to the current study, the VIF values for all three variables are given in Table 4.

Table 4: VIF Values

Construct	IB	OT
IB	-	
OT	1.322	
VM	1.322	1.00

Source: Survey Data, 2021

Coefficient of Determination/R-Square

According to Table 5, there is 51% of the impact from Viral Marketing on Online Trust while there is only 30.7% of the impact from 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 5: R-Square

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

Source: Survey Data, 2021

Path Coefficient

As all the t values are greater than 1.96 and all the p values are less than 0.05, H_1 , H_2 and H_3 can be accepted. See Table 6.

Table 6: Path Coefficient

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficients	t values	p values	Accepted/Rejected
H1	VM->OT	0.554	7.009	0.000	Accepted
H2	OT->IB	0.538	8.195	0.000	Accepted
H3	VM->IB	0.259	2.936	0.003	Accepted

Source: Survey Data, 2021

Mediation Analysis

Customers' Impulse Buying was positively predicted by Viral Marketing during the Covid-19 pandemic (Total effect-path coe.=0.557, $p=0.000$). When the indirect effects were examined, it was discovered that Online Trust mediates the association between Viral Marketing and Impulse Buying (Indirect effect-path coe=0.298, $p=0.000$). According to Hair et al. (2013), partial mediation occurs when VAF surpasses 0.2, while full mediation occurs when VAF exceeds 0.8. As a result, the VAF value in this study is more than 0.2 (VAF=0.535), indicating partial mediation. It means that Online Trust accounts for 53.5 percent of Viral Marketing's impact on Impulse Buying. As a result, H_4 (Online trust mediates the relationship between viral marketing and impulse buying) is acceptable (Table 7).

Table 7: Mediation Analysis

Effects	Path		<i>t</i> value	<i>p</i> value	VAF
	Coefficients				
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

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 to online trust and online trust to impulse buying agreeing with the previous research findings (Susilowati and 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).

The findings of this investigation have several theoretical implications. To begin, while there have been studies on the efficient use of viral marketing by firms, there have been few studies on the impact of viral marketing on consumer behaviors such as impulse buying. The current study successfully establishes the link between viral marketing and impulsive buying, demonstrating that viral marketing has a strong favorable impact on impulse purchases. Second, past research has rarely explained the function of trust in mediating the relationship between viral marketing and impulse purchases. As a result, the researcher has included online trust as a mediator, indicating that online trust partially mediates the association between viral marketing and impulse buying. The study brings a comprehensive interpretation about how to encourage impulse purchases utilizing viral marketing and online trust.

The following practical implications can also be derived from this present study. The goal of viral marketing is to spread e-word of mouth about a company's product throughout the community. During a pandemic, the correct viral marketing methods will encourage customers to make impulse purchases. As a result, if marketers want to stay in the market during the pandemic, they should invest more in marketing. They can expand the content on their website and include more resources to make it easier for clients to obtain information. They can also improve email marketing, pay-per-click advertising, and social

media participation. Using real-time data to understand customer needs, personalizing digital communications, and tracking the campaigns help 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. They can also use social media to stimulate positive emotions and feelings from customers by posting photographs, videos, audios, and testimonials about their products and services. They can also reach out to prospects and customers by creating online content, providing information about their offerings, and displaying their items in appealing ways. When they participate in these activities, the public gains trust in their offerings, and they begin to share the company's marketing message. Ultimately, when this information is being 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 from Covid-19 and they are in good quality, it will generate a higher level of public trust. As a result, the level of impulse buying will also increase. Thus, marketers should focus on building trust among consumers during the pandemic to stimulate impulse buying.

Conclusion

During a pandemic, it is impossible to restrict the dissemination of information throughout society. A greater amount of information about products, services, and health is exchanged within the community. This can be seen in the current Covid-19 pandemic crisis, when both customers and marketers heavily rely on digital media outlets to disseminate their messaging. Marketers have a significant opportunity to increase consumers' purchasing power if they use viral marketing methods effectively in the current environment. However, with the pandemic, a mediator may be required to improve this ability, particularly online trust, which has a partial impact as mentioned in this study. In the covid-19 pandemic era, this paper successfully investigated whether viral marketing has a positive impact on impulse buying, whether viral marketing has a positive impact on online trust, whether online trust has a positive impact on impulse buying, and whether viral marketing has an impact on impulse buying through online trust.

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 based on 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, 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 to the concept. Further, the current study was carried out amidst a pandemic (Covid-19) hence researcher suggests applying it in a normal condition.

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