

# **IMPACT OF HUMOR ON FORWARD INTENTION OF CUSTOMERS MEDIATED BY ATTITUDE TOWARDS MESSAGE; A CASE OF VIRAL MARKETING**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Technology has enabled marketers to use internet for enhancing their marketing efforts in reaching their customers effectively and efficiently. This paper examines the effect of humor in a viral marketing campaign on the forward intentions of individuals, mediated by attitude towards message. An experiment was conducted in the classrooms of Public Sector University, on undergraduate and graduate business students, and a questionnaire was personally administered at the end of the experiment to measure post treatment effect on their attitude towards message and forward intentions. The data was analyzed using different statistical tools. The results indicated that there is full mediation effect of attitude towards message on the relationship between humor and forward intentions.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The dependence of business on the use of technology has increased tremendously, especially in marketing communication. Amongst all technology that has been used so far, internet is the most useful and rich technology. Its use has increased a lot in the last decade or so in Pakistan. It has reached to 20.43 million internet users against .133 million in 2000 (Internet World Statistics Report, 2011). Previously, internet was not considered as a credible and responsible medium, but now, with its real and good perception, people lean more towards its usage. The diffusion of internet with emergence of various social constructs supported by internet technologies is changing the concepts of developing, and it is redefining the concept of marketing.

Internet has helped marketers increase its voice among its customers efficiently. Marketing practitioners, in their effort to be effective, use different promotional media like television, radio, billboard etc. to increase its reach to disseminate the marketing message. One such effective technique which has become of high interest to marketers throughout the world, because of its effectiveness, is viral marketing. Viral marketing is all about spreading word of mouth

by electronic means i.e. through e-mails, social groups/ communities online; hence using all choices available online to spread a message in masses as it works on the principle of multiplicity. According to Dobeles, Toleman, & Beverland (2005), individuals pass along interesting and favorable marketing information received via hypermedia. Viral marketing is a new practice in marketing area. It is conceptually similar to word of mouth marketing which has been considered as an effective and persuasive marketing tool (Bansal & Voyer 2000). Viral marketing has a compounding effect; a consumer tells five to ten people and then those five to ten people tell another five to ten people. It is like a virus that continuously infects more people and spreads without requiring any more marketing efforts.

The hypermedia environment is an important aspect of viral marketing. Viral marketing is dependent on the hypermedia environment to spread the message. It is the hypermedia environment that facilitates the quick spread of the message, because with email, several people can be reached simultaneously. This leads to a rapid spread of the message which is typical for viral marketing (Wilson, 2000). It makes the use of communication networks of customers (Helm, 2000) for forwarding the message to those potential people who are supposed to forward that message to friends,

family, colleagues and acquaintances via social media. There are several factors identified in earlier literature like commercial intentions, content of the message (humorous, emotional, incredible etc.), structure of the campaign, (Papagiannidis et al. 2008) media richness, source credibility, message persuasiveness (Bussiere 2009) that has been used to measure the effects on viral marketing. As viral marketing is all about sharing messages to masses, marketers look for the hypermedia context (online communities and online forums) which help them form a base to reach potential respondents who further will share that data; basically it has a multiplier effect. The matter of concern is what makes the message viral? How the attitude to forward or share a message develops? Although there have been a number of factors identified in earlier literature, but all these factors have been examined in the countries where internet is a way of life; businesses use viral marketing with a commercial intention to enhance its effect. It has never been examined in Pakistan where internet and mobile phone usage has been increasing at great pace, although 53% of the population lives under the poverty line (UN Report 2011) who can barely spend on basic needs. Even then, viral marketing is one of the emerging marketing techniques in such a country and marketing practitioners have started to use viral marketing for promoting their products and idea sharing in all age groups, specifically youth. Can viral marketing that heavily uses internet for its spread be a viable strategy? Can humor play a significant role in developing attitude of individuals toward message and their forwarding intentions?

This study aims to find out the relationship of humor on the receiver's forward intention mediated by attitude towards message in internet viral marketing campaign. Basically the study would try to answer as to why people forward humorous messages on internet, and also does humor create a positive attitude toward message?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Bussiere (2009) examined the effects of humor on the processing of word-of-mouth (WOM) messages. He assumed that the impact of a humorous message seems to be contingent on who receives the message. He found that neutral WOM messages had a larger impact on behavioral intentions than humorous WOM. Tang (2005) studied the effects of commercial intention, humor, and media richness on receivers' forward intention using internet viral marketing campaigns. He found a positive relationship of humor with forward intention and attitude towards message. Izawa (2010) analyzed the roles of emotions, impressions, utility

and social ties in online sharing behavior. Lu, Fu, and Yen (2007) studied the phenomenon that makes people read and forward message, based on theory of reasoned actions. They concluded that user attitude is the main factor that affects the compliance of reading message. They also found the positive effect of gender on attitude and forwarding intentions. De Bruyn & Lilien (2008) identified the role word-of-mouth plays during each stage of a viral marketing recipients' decision-making process, including the conditions that moderate such influence. Thureau and Walsh (2004) explored the answer to what motivate consumers to read the content of other unknown consumers. Their results illustrated that consumers are used to reading online content, mainly to save time and do better buying decisions. Jonker (2008) explored the message aspects and motivations that make individuals to forward viral messages. He concluded that humor and wonder increase the likeliness of forwarding a video, and that a humorous video is forwarded to more people than a non-humorous video. However, he found no evidence on forwarding the provocative videos. He also found that people enjoy forwarding videos to those with whom they have strong ties.

## Variables and Model of the Study

### Viral Marketing

Helm (2000) described viral marketing as any company's activity that use customers' social communication networks to make people aware about their products, and a communication and allocation concept that relies on the support of customers to broadcast digital products via email to other potential customers in their social circle, and to enforce these contacts to also send out the products. Another definition by Langner (2007) suggests word-of-mouth advertising for promoting the company with its products. Langner (2007) also explained it in the process of approaching customers via web that are more persuasive toward forwarding a company's marketing message to their own contacts (Laudon & Traver, 2001).

Viral marketing was first initiated by venture capitalists Draper and Jurvetson (2004) to portray rapid adoption patronage through word-of-mouth networks. Viral marketing uses electronic referral voluntarily due to their persuasive behavior to forward those messages to their contact circle, and that make them less complimentary. Abundant literature is available on WOM but has not been adopted so far, and a lot of attention is given to spontaneous WOM communication, but not from electronic context (De Bruyn & Lilien 2004).

The Viral marketing is used as a strategy that encourage individuals to forward marketing messages that they receive in a social transfer of messages, in the context of hypermedia environment, creating the prospective for exponential growth in the message exposure. It also influence others to broadcast message to their social contacts as well (Doblele Toleman & Beverland 2005, Wilson 2002).

## Humor

Literature provides evidence that the messages containing humor are most likely to be read and forwarded (Dobele, Toleman & Beverland, 2005;Kharif, 2000). An analysis conducted in their study showed that half of the emails were humorous. Humor is more used in viral marketing in comparison to T.V ads (Porter & Golan 2006).

According to perception and intensive work by Lynch (2002), it was concluded that humor is a proposed or unplanned message interpreted as funny, yet the communication field has only skimmed the surface of the world of humor. Duncan (1979) argued in support of humor that the little use of it in message content can ensure audience concentration, increase advertisement memorability, overcomes sales resistance, and enhance message expressiveness. However, it also depends on the recipient that how he processed it (Zhang & Zinkhan, 2006).

Humor is a shared event by an individual with another individual, that is amusing to the target and that the target perceives it as an intentional act (Cooper, 2005). It is a stimuli that provokes laugh or smile and can be little offensive as well, yet playful to the object of laughter and done solely with the aim of amusement (Gruner, 1976). These definitions reveal that humor is an intentional interaction between two or more people having a clear goal. The goal hereby is to make customers laugh, compelling them to share further. Whereas the target of the intended humorous message decide whether the message was funny or not. It has also been categorized as puns, limericks, jokes, and one liners (Brooker, 1981) and also classified into processes, humorous disparagement (interpersonal), arousal safety (effective), and incongruity-resolution (cognitive) (Speck, 1990). From industrial application it was concluded that the humorous ads outweigh the non-humorous and that it is directly linked to attention and recognition (Madden 1982, Weinberger 1997). Researchers also provide evidence that humor make messages more attractive, likeable and hence more memorable (Rossiter & Percy 1997). In reference to above literature we can hypothesize that humor can have a significant effect on the attitude.

*Hypothesis 1. Humor in a message has a significant effect on the attitude toward that message.*

## Attitude Towards Message

Attitude towards message pertains to the impression that message forms on the receiver. It is the behavior of the receiver that how he will perceive, interpret and like or dislike the message. If he likes, then would he forward it to the others or not? To analyze how message will affect consumer cognition, behavior and attitude, it must be first learnt as to how this attitude is formed (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960). It has been evident by researchers that the outside look of the message will first affect the attitude and then will affect the cognition and behavior. If the attitude towards message is positive, it is more likely to be shared.

A number of literatures have proved this fact that behavioral intention is greatly influenced by attitude (Mackenzie, 1986). The consensus had arrived at this point that attitude is the most important element that mediates and the consumer decides to purchase or not. While related to email forward behavior, it is even more important that attitude must be made positive by forming such messages for receiver, because only then the forwarding of email will be possible. People have a different emotional response when they receive forwarded emails and these responses are those that further influence receiver's behavior (Phelps et al., 2004). The attitude of the receiver towards message is thus crucial to make it viral, as the negative attitude will form a barrier in forwarding the message.

*Hypothesis 2. Individuals attitude toward message will have significant effect on his intention to forward a message.*

## Forward Intentions

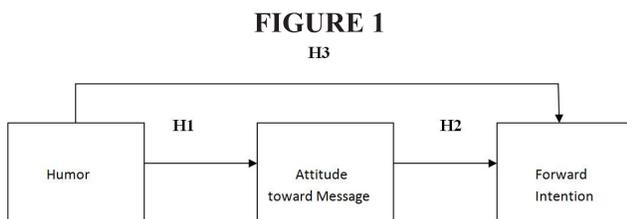
Forward intentions refer to a receiver/individual's urge to share message with others on the network. It basically forms when the receiver find something very unusual, interesting and amusing to be shared with others in his contact list. Many theories are proposed to explain why people engage in interpersonal communication, one such conceptual framework was formed by Schutz (1966) that integrates various motivations essential for forwarding the web content. He projected a three dimensional theory of interpersonal behavior named FIRO (Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation) explaining that people appoint for interpersonal communication because they are motivated by their needs; they express one or more of three interpersonal

needs: inclusion, affection and control. Inclusion is the need to be part of a group (need for attention), affection is to show gratitude and apprehension for others, and control is considered as the need to exert power to others in one's social environment.

People feel reluctant to forward messages unless the message promises some kind of satisfaction, that is emotional, social and beneficial (Dichter, 1966). It was further suggested that motivating people to forward content is possible when that content fulfills individual, interpersonal and relational needs (Snyder & Cantor, 1998). Forwarding is also more likely to happen when the receiver has ease of internet usage (technology) (Fagan, Neill, & Wooldridge, 2008), his intention to use internet (Davis, 1992) and the frequency of that internet usage (Teo, Lin & Lai, 1999). This is also related with the intention of knowledge sharing, i.e. when receiver receives or finds something worthy to add to the knowledge; he is more likely to forward it (Osterloh & Frey, 2000). The researches on WOM indicate that self-involvement and enhancement serves as motivation to forward messages (Dichter, 1966). Based on the above discussion the following hypothesis is developed.

*Hypothesis 3. Humor in message will have significant effect on individual forwarding intentions mediated by attitude toward message*

The relationship among the above mentioned variables are shown in the following figure 1, where humor is hypothesized to have cause and effect relationship with forward intention mediated by attitude of the individual toward message.



## Research Design

This study aimed at finding a causal relationship between dependent and independent variables, therefore a field experiment was conducted to find the same. Field experiment would not only address the internal validity of the study, but also, to some extent, the generalizability of the study (Sekaran, 1999). The population for the study included those individuals who were internet proficient and they have been using internet for some reason. As learning and using internet has become part of our education, therefore to get a computer proficient sample,

the study deliberately conducted a field experiment in Public Sector University in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The university has enrolled a mix of individuals from not only the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, but also from across the country. The sample was drawn from the population using purposive non-probability sampling due to the nature of the field experiment. This experiment was necessarily undertaken during the ongoing classes without sensitizing the sample.

## Procedure

For conduction of this experiment the lecturers of different graduate and undergraduate classes were approached to embed a humorous clip in their lecture slides and administer a questionnaire at the end of the lecture, where the respondents were subjected to an experiment (without having prior knowledge) and post experiment data was collected once. This activity was performed at different undergraduate students' classes at different times. A humorous video clip (three minutes duration approximately) were used as treatment effect and then the attitude toward the message was measured with a help of self-administered questionnaire. The respondents were asked to mention their email to get a copy of the video if they are willing to share it.

## Research instrument

The research instrument contained a total twelve (12) items, where 4 item measured humor (adapted from Cline, Altsech, & Kellaris 2003), five item measured attitudes toward message (adapted from Muehling & Laczniak 1988), three items measured forward intentions (adapted from Harrison-walker 2001). The study used 5 point likert interval scale as response scale. The cronbach alpha for the above mentioned constructs are given below in table 1.

**TABLE 1**

Construct	Cronbach Alpha	Number of Items
Humor	.76	4
Attitude toward Message	.75	5
Forward Intentions	.81	3

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation and correlation matrix are provided in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**  
**Descriptive Statistics and Pearson’s Correlations**

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Humor	20.16	3.25	1		
2. Attitude to ward Message	20.30	3.43	.621(**)	1	
3. Forward Intentions	11.58	2.71	.350(**)	.618(**)	1

\*\*=  $p < .01$ (two tailed) and  $N = 78$  for all analyses

The descriptive statistics show the mean ranges from minimum value of 11.58 (Forward Intention) to a maximum value of 20.30 (Attitude toward Message). The table also shows that there is positive significant relationship between all the variables of the research i.e. humor, attitude towards message and forward intentions.

The study used Baron and Kenny’s (1986) model of mediation to identify the intensity of mediating effect by attitude towards message. Before analyzing the mediation effect, the study determined the direct effect of all variables, i.e. humor on attitude towards message, attitude towards message on forward intentions, and humor on forward intention. The study found significant direct relationship between these variables. These results validate our first and second hypotheses. This result also validate the work of several researchers (Eisend, 2001; Bussiere, 2009; Spots, Weinberger & Parsons,1997; Beverland, Lindgreen & Van Wijk, 2007).

**TABLE 3**  
**Regression Equation Coefficients for Humor,  
Attitude towards Message and individuals forward  
intention**

	$R^2$	$F$	$B$	$S.E$	$\beta$	$t$
<i>Step 1</i>						
Constant			5.691	1.834		3.104*
Humor	.123	10.61	.292	.090	.350	3.258*
<i>Step 2</i>						
Constant			2.027	1.678		1.208*
Humor	.384	23.361	-.046	.097	-.055	-.478
Attitude toward Message			.517	.092	.652	5.640*

\*=  $p < .05$  (two tailed) and  $N = 78$  for all analyses

Table 3 showed the regression analysis of humor as predictor of forward intention. In step 1, humor was entered into regression equation. The value of R square = .12 with  $F(1, 78) = 10.61$ ,  $p < .002$  explains 12% variation in forward intention. The regression weight substantially changed (.35 to -.055), but the relationship became insignificant, therefore there is full mediation (Baron and Kenny, 1986). This means that humor

only has direct effect on attitude towards message, not forward intention as it is totally mediated by attitude towards message. With this result the study accept hypothesis no 3 where the relationship between humor and forward intention is hypothesized to be mediated by attitude towards message. It means that the receiver could not forward message until and unless the message shape their attitude towards message either in a positive or a negative way. As we hypothesized that formation of attitude due to humor (as message content) positively affect the forward intention, the results support the hypothesis. The results of the study is in line with Tang (2005)

### DISCUSSION

Although a number of studies reported a positive effect of humor on forwarding attention, but the viral marketing only works if the receiver is always intended to forward message it receives to its social contact circle online because it lies on the basic concept of exponential increase or spread. And that forward intention is not to be solely considered but is dependent on many things like the content, medium, and the receivers. The intention to forward is thus dependent on the attitude but once the attitude is formed, the message becomes viral. Internet has given that advantage to make message as you want it and provide convenience to share it by easily adjusting your message according to your receiver. The higher the humorous message, the positive it would make the attitude of respondents which would lead them to forward that information to their social contact circle. For example, if a message contains emotional factor, i.e. humor in its context and have sufficient audio video feature that supports the information and represent that information in such a way that it becomes easy to understood, then that message would generate a positive attitude in respondents. They would feel happy, amused, pleased etc. and will definitely forward that message to their contacts in their address book. Humor message and its impact on forward intention may vary because of the receiver’s intention to forward the message. If one feels the message is amusing, he/she would prefer to forward it, but if one does not find it amusing, then there are fewer chances to forward messages.

### CONCLUSION

The study concludes that messages do go viral, and making them viral depends on the attitude of receiver towards that message. It proves that the attitude plays basic role in making messages viral. The attitude, if formed positive incites forward intention. The forward intention is dependent on the attitude of the receiver

towards message; hence the message content is a major element to be considered to shape that attitude to perform desired action, i.e. sharing. The study indicates that the respondents are willing to share among their contacts if they find message appropriate for the purpose, and that internet is a rich medium to be considered where males are more inclined towards sharing as compared to females. It was also observed that viral marketing works but only needs to be handled properly. The study concluded that the potential respondents will forward humorous content to their contact circle, no matter to which group they belong. There is no significant effect on forward intention of respondents on the basis of their education levels.

### Limitation and Future Research Direction

The study is conducted with a limited sample because of the nature of experiment. It may be tested on a large sample in order to increase its generalizability. The study used a questionnaire in order to ensure the predictive validity of the respondents' responses regarding intention to forward the humorous clip. By asking respondents to write their email addresses served as a limitation for receiving the clip. The study should be carried on social media with a specially designed URL for the purpose. The study provides baseline to conduct research in the emerging technique of viral marketing.

Reexamining the conceptual model would help to increase the results' reliability. Further research is required to decompose the relationship between the variables and the probability of more mediating variables could strengthen the relationship and would produce more generalizable results.

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