Self-Congruity With Viral Messages: Investigating Its Impact on Message Perception and Forwarding Intentions

Daniela Schaefer, University of Basel, Switzerland
Eva Walther, University of Basel, Switzerland
Manfred Bruhn, University of Basel, Switzerland
Verena Schoenmueller, University of Basel, Switzerland

The study demonstrates that social as well as ideal social self-congruity with viral messages positively impact forwarding intentions. Moreover, forwarding to a rather uncontrollable audience is found to be more strongly determined by social self-congruity, whereas forwarding to a rather controllable audience is more strongly determined by ideal social self-congruity.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1014019/volumes/v10e/E-10

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyight.com/.
Self-Congruity with Viral Messages: Investigating its Impact on Message Perception and Forwarding Intentions

Verena Schoenmueller, University of Basel, Switzerland*
Manfred Bruhn, University of Basel, Switzerland
Eva Walther, University of Basel, Switzerland
Daniela Schaefer, University of Basel, Switzerland

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Viral messages have enabled films, pictures or other pieces of information to spread like wildfire beyond the control of any company or institution reaching thousands or even millions of users. One key question that arises is what motivates individuals to share viral messages? A few studies have already started to identify the impact of cognitive and social motivational factors or personality aspects of users on their forwarding behavior (e.g., Taylor, Strutton, and Thompson 2012; Ho and Dempsey 2010; Huang, Lin, and Lin 2009; Chiu et al. 2007). However, the mechanisms involved are still little understood (Ho and Dempsey 2010). Berger and Milkman (2012) emphasize the possible relevance of self-presentation motives, identity signaling or affiliation goals regarding the forwarding behavior of users, while focusing, in particular, on the different audiences and the different channels that can be used.

Based on the outlined research gap, the present study builds on research in areas connected with viral marketing: these include word of mouth (WOM) and advertising, both of which offer strong evidence that the self-concept delivers a motivational explanation for why individuals forward viral messages. In the context of WOM, research demonstrates that consumers are more inclined to provide WOM regarding self-relevant products, as these offer social benefits such as the opportunity to present the self (Chung and Darke 2006). In the field of advertising research, several studies demonstrate that the self-congruity of advertisement inducements are more effective than incongruent inducements and exert a stronger effect on consumers’ preferences and behavioral intentions (e.g., Chang 2005; Zinkhan and Hong 1991).

Transferring these results to the viral marketing context, congruity with a message, i.e., the degree to which a message fits with a person’s self-concept, is assumed to impact the sender’s intention, as the message is used to shape the image of the self. Since the action of forwarding viral messages necessarily involves other people, implying the visibility of the action, this study focuses on both social and ideal social self-congruity. Building on this, we develop a model to analyze the impact of self-congruity (social as well as ideal social self-congruity) on the viral message forwarding intentions of individuals by differentiating between global (Analysis 1) as well as two specific forms of forwarding intentions (narrowcasting and broadcasting; Analysis 2).

The model posits that social and ideal social self-congruity affect the intention to forward directly and indirectly though the attitude towards the viral message. Involvement with viral messages is added to the model as an additional predictor of the intention to forward. The reasoning for this is drawn from the literature on market mavens, which identifies the fact that some individuals are highly informed about preferred product categories, show high involvement in them, and are active providers of information about them (Slama and Williams 1990). By transferring this to the context of viral messages, we assume that individuals with a high involvement in viral messages (i.e., viral mavens) benefit from the general forwarding of viral messages. The model also constitutes the basis for Analysis 2. This analysis investigates the differences between narrowcasting and broadcasting. Building on Berger and Milkman (2012), narrowcasting describes the forwarding of messages to people who share a certain familiarity with the sender. With regard to the channel used, narrowcasting tends to take place via email, as this channel allows the sender to select the individual receivers of the message. Broadcasting a viral message implies that message forwarding is comparatively less controllable in the sense that the sender is less able to determine who receives the message. This also implies that messages stand a higher chance of being forwarded to people who belong to a wider circle of acquaintances or are only indirectly connected with the sender. This is often the case with posted messages on social network platforms.

In order to generate a representational set of viral messages, three experts in the area of marketing screen relevant sites for viral messages in the WWW and review the regular rankings or awards that are given for successful viral messages. Videos and images as well as branded and non-branded viral messages are used. The participants are randomly assigned to one of 12 viral messages. In total, a final data set of 412 participants is generated. To measure self-congruity (social and ideal social self-congruity), two different approaches are used which have each been widely applied in previous research and which demonstrate two possible impression formation routes: piecemeal and holistic processing (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al. 2012).

The results of Analysis 1 demonstrate that social as well as ideal social self-congruity impact forwarding intentions significantly. Additionally, ideal social self-congruity has a significant indirect effect on forwarding intention via the attitude towards the message. This leads to ideal social self-congruity having a relatively greater overall impact compared to social self-congruity. The analysis of more detailed forwarding (Analysis 2) shows that message forwarding to a rather uncontrollable audience, i.e., forwarding via platforms such as Facebook or YouTube, is more strongly determined by the need for social consistency, and hence by social self-congruity, whereas message forwarding to a preselected and thus controllable group of people is more strongly determined by the need for social approval, and hence by ideal social self-congruity. Finally, involvement in messaging is also found to exert a significant impact on forwarding intentions. However, this effect is inferior compared to the self-congruity effects. This implies that for the so-called viral mavens the basic self-congruity effect is amplified by the general message involvement effect.

To sum up, the results of the present study add to the field of viral marketing by using the self-concept to explain the motivations that prompt individuals to forward viral messages. The results will be of interest to marketing managers, as they demonstrate the importance of considering the self-concept when designing viral messages so that they reflect the self-concept of the target audience. Further research should aim at investigating these effects using behavioral data. Additionally, a more detailed analysis of forwarding behavior with regard to different audiences should be conducted.
REFERENCES


