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**Analyzing the determinants of the UK consumer's engagement
in Viral Marketing on Social Networking Sites: A university
Student's perspective**

Thesis for the Master's degree in Business Administration

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Abstract

Social media, especially the social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook.com, has experienced exponential growth all across the globe in the last decade. It is rapidly attracting the consumers and replacing the traditional media. Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) through social media has acquired substantial position in the marketing mix as well as integrated marketing communication of the business organizations. This research aimed at analyzing different social relationship factors or determinants of engagement of the UK consumers in the process of viral marketing from the perspective of the university students in the UK. The process of viral marketing on SNSs is initiated by the manufacturers, marketers or distributors but the process is controlled by the consumers. To meet the main objectives of the research, quantitative research methods were followed through deductive approach. Convenience and purposive sampling were utilized in order to select a sample of 130 students from the population of the UK university students. Only 105 students responded and took part in the survey. All the ethical issues involved in the survey were catered and participants were informed about the purpose of investigation through consent letters prior to email the questionnaire. The questionnaire was emailed to the students to collect primary data that was statistically analyzed by using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The data for each variable was subjected to univariate analysis in order to evaluate the significance of each social factor under study. The results obtained from univariate analysis were graphically presented and interpreted. Correlation (Bivariate) analysis of different factors including trust, homophily, interpersonal influence, love for exchanging information etc. was also conducted and results were presented in a tabulated form. The analysis revealed that all the factors under investigation showed positive relationship and some showed positive correlation with the activity of the consumers on SNSs, especially in seeking opinion or information and passing it to others. The correlation analysis revealed that some social constructs e.g. trust, homophily and normative influence was positively correlated with the consumer's activity on the social networking sites. Tie strength showed positive correlation with homophily, frequency of communication or contact between the online consumers on social networking sites. Gender showed negative correlation with most of the social factors under study. The results

are discussed in light of existing literature on word of mouth marketing and social media marketing. The implications (theoretical, managerial and strategy related) of these results are along with the main findings of the study.

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List of Abbreviations

SNS	Social Networking Sites
eWOM	Electronic Word of Mouth
SD	Standard Deviation
ROI	Return on Investment
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
IMC	Integrated Marketing Communication
WOMMA	Word of Mouth Marketing Association

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Background

Social media has become popular and its usage has been increasing exponentially since the beginning of 21st century. It has also attained the status of one of the most influential and rapid mode of communication throughout the world. The increased usage of social media from the consumers also forced business organizations to use this media for marketing their products. As reported by Mangold and Faulds (2009), social media is considered as the most critical and mixed element in integrated marketing communication. The persistently increasing use of social media across the globe has resulted in the focus of the marketers and researchers on this media as a tool for marketing. Business organizations and firms use and consider social media as the most efficient tool for developing durable, long term and responsible affiliation with their existing as well as potential customers across the globe (Tobin and Braziel, 2008).

The makeup of social media includes several digital and Internet based applications. All these applications are aimed at helping the social media users to create information and disseminate information across the social networks. The applications on social media help in exchanging the information in the most convenient way. Most of the elements and applications that constitute social media are based on the Web 2.0 technology. Web 2.0 is a revolutionary technology that facilitates peer -to- peer exchange of information in all forms including graphics, audio, text and video.

Internet users on social websites throughout the world enjoy the opportunity of sharing their knowledge and experiences of purchasing and using different products or services offered by different companies. Every member of social media websites has a friend's circle with which he or she can share the good or bad experience. SNSs (Social Networking Sites) have used Web 2.0 technology to become the largest and most interactive platform as far as social media is concerned. Facebook.com, LinkedIn, Youtube.com, Twitter, Orkut.com and MySpace are some of the largest and fastest growing SNSs (ComScore, 2011). The marketers focus on using all the communication mediums as elements of the integrated marketing plans (Sanchez, 2005). The rapid growth of internet and use of social media attracted marketers and they started using

internet for accessing the target and potential customers and making their integrated marketing more effective (Sernovitz, Godin and Kawasaki, 2009).

Kotler (2011) defined marketing as the part of integrated management that aims at acquiring individual as well as organizational objectives through production, manufacturing, offers and exchange of valuable products or services to the consumers or potential customers. In the words of Drucker, marketing can be expressed as, “*there is only one definition of valid business purpose: to create a customer*”. According to Mangold and Faulds (2009), marketing as well as innovation is the fundamental function of a firm or entrepreneur. The centre or focal point of all the business activities is marketing because it is quite distinguishing activity and revolves around all the basic strategies of the business organizations.

Silk (2006) reported that marketing encompasses all the functions of an organizations that are aimed at formulating and providing utility and value to the end consumer. The definitions by different experts and researchers depict that marketing is the only tool for the determination of strategic management and development of the firms. Successful marketing is dependent on several factors including information regarding condition of the market, behaviour of the target customers, knowledge regarding the major competitors present in the market, their abilities of managing the risk, ability of management to intelligently utilize organizational resources, ability of creating value in terms of quality of product and prices offered.

The development of new technologies led towards division of communicating media (the medium for transmission of promotional message) into two separate elements, the first and older segment is traditional media while novel or innovative segment is social media. Radio and television are major mediums of traditional media while Internet, SNSs, blogs and review websites belong to the social media segment (Cravens, 2006). Anderson (2010) conducted a comparative analysis of the social and traditional media and reported that use of social media for marketing has posed serious questions to the cost effectiveness of utilizing traditional media as the major medium for marketing communication.

Social media is the most popular in developed countries and is making rapid hold in the developing nations with the development and provision of the facility of Internet. ComScore (2009) reported USA, UK, Australia and Japan as the top countries with dominated use of SNSs.

According to the social media census, more than 50% of the pensioners in the UK use facebook.com, more than 37.4 million adults are active and regular users of facebook.com; youtube.com is daily used by 32 million UK citizens, 15.5 million UK adults have current and active Twitter accounts and 7.9 and 6.7 million UK adults are using LinkedIn and Flickr respectively. These stats show the reach of the social media to the UK consumers and diversity of the people using this medium to share their knowledge, ideas and experiences (ComScore, 2011).

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), the consumers are converting to social media and leaving the traditional media due to economic as well as technological factors. The technological factors that have caused this transition include increasing bandwidth for Internet transmission while economic factors that are leading the transition include cost effectiveness promised by Internet and social media for the transmission of content to several people at a time as well as creation of online content called User Generated Content (UGC). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) provided an insight and detailed analysis of these factors and the process of transition that is leading towards enormous use of social media. This study further examined the factors that stimulated and accelerated the transition of people across the globe towards social media. An important factor identified and emphasized in the study was the role played by information technology to redeem young generation. Young people are the largest asset of social media because they are the current and future customers of numerous products and the central focus of the most of almost all marketing strategies. Social media offers direct access to the millions of these consumers along with users of all age to the firms.

The phenomenon that involved the use of emails and other internet based services for communication as well as propagation of promotional content pertinent to the products or services by business organizations is termed as electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Anderson, 2010). According to Cackim (2010), the word of mouth has also been used as the key element of traditional marketing. It is the traditional word of mouth that transformed into eWOM when use of Internet started to grow and it was used for marketing products and services. With the social media and SNSs, traditional word mouth that evolved into eWOM at the end of twentieth century has now transformed into Word of Mouse or viral marketing (Kotler & Keller, 2011). In light the above discussed importance of social media, more and more consumers moving towards it and

the relationship between the members of this media, it is essential to determine the factors that influence the involvement of consumers in viral marketing i.e. the process of sharing information to the friends and relatives present in the friends list of the members. The main objectives of the research as discussed in the following section.

1.5 Aims and Objectives

Word of mouse or viral marketing has emerged as a result of rapid development of Social media or SNSs. Marketers have also forecasted its importance and its significant role for directly accessing their target customers. Despite intensive investigation on the social media and its exponentially growing usage across the globe, the major factors responsible for viral marketing effective and productive need further investigation. Therefore, the study aims at analyzing the determinants of consumer involvement in viral marketing. Following lines entail the major aims and objectives of this research.

- To review the relevant literature for understanding various theories and models of viral marketing as well as traditional and electronic word of mouth
- To identify and evaluate various factors that may affect the engagement of the UK consumers, with special emphasis on the university students, in word of mouse
- To formulate recommendations for marketers to effectively use word of mouse in integrated marketing on the basis of results of this study

The detailed and critical review of recent and relevant literature was conducted in order to identify the determinants of involvement of consumers in word of mouse. Appropriate research design and research methods (e.g. sampling techniques, data collection method, data analysis techniques) were selected in order to achieve the objectives given above.

1.6 Research Question

In order to analyze and explore the key determinants of the UK consumer's involvement in viral marketing, following question is formulated through extensive review of literature.

What are the key determinants of the UK consumer's engagement in the viral marketing?

1.7 Scope and Practical Relevance

Since the origin of media, it has been playing a fundamental role in advertisement and marketing of services and products. Social media has been revolutionized in past two decades,

especially in the UK and other developed nations (Evans, 2008). The efficient use of websites, Web 2.0 technology, groups, online communities and blogs has enabled the social media to attract the users of traditional media. Business marketing has also been revolutionized due to rapid development in social media. Therefore, it is passing through a shift from traditional based to social media based marketing. According to Gil – Or (2010), customers are the most vital assets of a business organization and a considerable number of target customers have shifted from traditional to social media in past few years. As a result marketing activities of the business organizations have also moved to social media.

The research has substantial scope, as the results will reveal the major factors that engage a consumer to take part in viral marketing. The marketing managers can capitalize on the results of this research in order to make effective viral marketing strategies because the results of this research have revealed the major factors or determinants of consumer involvement in this activity. Since the online consumers control the process of viral marketing through a click of their mouse, increase in their involvement will lead towards increased and rapid viral marketing. The marketers can improve their marketing strategies and enhance the productivity of these strategies by considering the main determinants of the UK consumer involvement in word of mouse. Although the study involves the perspective of university students for these determinants yet the results can be generalized to all other social media users in the UK and have practical applications for all the business organizations targeting the UK customers through viral marketing. Once the firm uploads an update of product or a promotional message on SNSs, the members of the social networks carry out the rest of the process.

1.8 Results

From the analysis of primary data collected during the research through online survey, the study identified five major determinants of the UK consumer engagement in exchange of information. These five social factors including tie strength (both weak and strong), trust, homophily, love to share the information and interpersonal influence (both informative and normative influence) were positively associated with the activity of the UK consumers on SNSs. Some of these social constructs also showed positive correlation among one another. For instance, trust and homophily showed positive correlation and tie strength and homophily were also positively correlated.

1.9 Outline of the Thesis

This section provides chapter-wise overview of this thesis. First chapter of the thesis provides background of the viral marketing and importance of social media for the business organizations. Key aims and objectives for analyzing the major determinants of engagement of consumers are also described in this chapter. Moreover, the scope and significance of the study and its results are mentioned in this chapter. Review of literature provides main theories and concepts of viral marketing, in depth analysis of the literature and compares and contrasts the results of different studies pertaining to different factors that can affect the engagement of members of SNSs in the exchange of information to their friends and other links. The significance of social media users for business organizations in spreading the promotional messages is also reviewed.

Third chapter of the thesis discusses possible research methods and research approaches in light of the aims and objectives of this research. The applicability and suitability of the research methods to the current study is discussed. The selected research design, approach, sample, sampling method, data collection techniques and tools or methods used for data analysis and interpretation are explained along with their rationale. The ethical issues pertinent to this study, validity of data and reliability of the research with special emphasis on the data collection, recording, sorting and analyzing methods are described in detail.

Fourth chapter presents the results obtained after analyzing the primary data through appropriate statistical methods. The results are expressed in graphical or tabulated form along with the description and interpretation of the key findings. This chapter also presents discussion on the main findings from the data analysis and results of this investigation. The thesis ends with the fifth chapter where conclusion and recommendations are presented for the business organizations to utilize the results of this study. Future work and practical implications of the study are also discussed.

Chapter 2 – Theory & Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical background and existing body of knowledge regarding viral marketing and different factors affecting the involvement of consumer in this mode of marketing, particularly the consumers from the UK. Marketing, its importance and its role for the business organizations have been described in the first section. Since the viral marketing is done through social media as a medium of exchanging information, the next section (section 2.3) entails the relevance of social media and its use for the marketing activities through analyzing the results of previous researches involving social media and its application in marketing. After analyzing the literature pertinent to social media in context of marketing, the next section presents the concept of viral marketing and use of social networking websites and the online members of these networks in the process of viral marketing.

2.2 Marketing

According to Mohr, Sengupta and Slater (2010), marketing can be described as a set of different activities with the aim of communication and delivery of various products and services; these products offer value and utility for target customers or the whole society. The most fundamental concept that formulates marketing is the human need. Human beings have certain basic needs including physical requirement of food, shelter and cloth; social needs of the human beings include belonging or association while individual needs like knowledge or art of self-expression (Armstrong and Kotler, 2009).

Armstrong and Kotler (2009) described want or demand as the want that is backed by purchasing power. Successful marketing plans or strategies are based on true needs of the customers. Therefore, the firms that want to have successful marketing strategies put great stress and input for understanding the needs of the end consumers and potential customers. Therefore, successful marketing strategies are customer centered (Armstrong and Kotler, 2009). Companies that have good orientation of the market earn more market share and profit as compared to less market oriented firms (Best, 2009). Armstrong and Kotler (2009) described marketing management as the science of selection of markets and building productive association with these markets. Along with other elements, one of the basic elements of marketing is the selection of the medium

for sending the promotional messages of the company to the target customers. According to Armstrong and Kotler (2009), online marketing has become the most rapid form of marketing.

Another perspective of marketing was revealed by Treadaway and Smith (2010). They reported that marketing is the activity of delivering top quality products and enhance living standards of the end consumers. There are two fundamental elements of marketing including buyers and sellers. Theory and fundamental framework of marketing and communication indicates that advances in communication technologies have brought revolution in the marketing in last ten years. Practitioners define marketing from practical perspective as the combination of different management strategies or processes where every activity is a node and plays a particular role in effectual functioning of marketing plans (Evans, 2008). From this definition, it is evident that marketers do not consider marketing as a mere function but a combination of different processes. Marketing is no more merely a marketer's job and it is now considered the job of everybody. Furthermore, this approach believes that marketing functions have not only diffused but its influence and impact has been enhanced as far as potential customers are concerned.

Modern concept of marketing shows that it has become everything of business due to change of its importance and position from a function to a business approach (Peng, 2010). The current environment of communication through Internet has lent new directions to marketing. Many investigations have been conducted and abundant literature has been produced regarding the novel prospects in the field of marketing (Leskovec, Adamic and Huberman, 2007). The practitioners and academicians have proposed multiple approaches for marketing and firm's orientation in the regional and global markets.

Fox (2009) conducted research on marketing and explored its relationship with different factors including profitability, productivity, introduction of new products or brands and extension of existing brands manufactured and offered to the consumers by a firm. He (2009) reported a positive association of all these factors with effective marketing. Many empirical studies, case studies and pragmatic investigations (e.g. Chu and Kim, 2011; Treadaway & Smith, 2010; Anderson, 2010; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Valenzuela et al. 2009) have supported the presence of affirmative association between marketing and above mentioned factors. Academicians have explored the advantages of marketing and its positive effect on business from different parts of the world. These investigations have resulted in the evolution of new

marketing theories that are being practiced throughout the world. The academicians have extensively elaborated the gains of marketing and established many theories of management that are studied and applied worldwide.

2.3 Social Media and Marketing

As evident from the above section, marketing has attained the status of everything of business while communications has been described as soul of this phenomenon. The last two decades have experienced several developments on ideological as well as technological frontiers. These developments looked encouraging for achievement of objectives through marketing. However, the developments proved ineffective and failed to keep up with the market pressure in the long run (Doyle and Stern, 2006). Moreover, these technologies could not become successful due to rapid development of more efficient and advanced technologies.

Many of the concerns question the effectiveness of traditional media marketing and communication for the target and potential customers with young age. The studies on social media marketing have revealed its continuously increasing use of social media for marketing communication. Social media, during last decade in particular, has seen serious and long lasting shifts as far as marketing is concerned. The trends show that SNSs will take over the marketing world due to its continuous increase. The prospects of using social media, especially the SNSs, are discussed in the following lines with special emphasize on the current situation of social media in the UK.

According to statistics issues by ComScore (2011), Facebook.com has come forward as the most commonly used and famous SNS because 77% of the all UK citizens have an active account on this SNS. 80% of the women contributed while the percentage of men significantly lowered to 72% in the whole population. The statistics also revealed the age based division with almost all (95%) of the youth (aging between 18 and 25) have active accounts on facebook.com while older people only showed 55% participation at this network. Among other SNSs, LinkedIn was reported to be the most popular among social media users aging between 18 – 24 years in the UK. This trend was even higher in older people as they had 23 percent participation at LinkedIn.

Since this study analyzes the determinants of engagement of the UK consumers in viral marketing, the overview of use of social media in the UK provides an insight into the reach of

the social media to the target customers. Maximum usage of SNSs by the youth and old aged persons in the UK shows the extent to which social media provide direct access to the business organizations to their target as well as potential customers. Smith (2009) also reported the participation of increasing number of social media users in writing comments, reviews and blogs. Number of comment readers and like pages shows the activity and influence of online social network members.

The worldwide stats of use of social media that depicted the dominance of young boys and girls are now changing and recent stats show that dominance of young people is depleting with the passage of time (Evans, 2008). Empirical research was carried out by Angel and Sexsmith (2009) who concluded that the largest demographics at the SNSs were females of more than age 55 on the social networking site facebook.com. However, people from all sorts of demographics contribute in and use social media. Therefore, the significance of social media has been enhanced for the purpose of marketing and communication in the business.

The reports and stats discussed above evidently reveal that SNSs are the sites that have maximum target customers and consumers; they interact among them on almost all types of issues including the services or products offered under a brand name. At this forum, business organizations can start discussion regarding their product, promotions, new offers, loyalty schemes and new products. Once the message containing the intended message is shared on the social websites, firm can directly reach its potential customers and can get feedback from the end users of the product. The firm can also provide updates and respond to the feedback of the end users but the flow of message from one to other member remains under the control of members of SNSs. They like, share and comment on the firm's message with merely a click of mouse and perform their role in spreading the word of mouse.

The popular maxim of marketing approach is that business organizations always follow the potential customers. To meet their need and follow this maxim, the organizations are moving towards the use of social networks for advertisement campaigns and promotion plans. In traditional media marketing campaigns, the firms face difficulty in accessing the customers that did not use traditional media and were difficult to approach. Technological advances and attraction of social media has made them accessible to all the firms using social media

communication channel. According to Anderson (2010), social media marketing has enabled the firms to send their message to the remotest of places without incurring additional costs.

The importance and worldwide reach of social media is evident from the decision of Pepsi, the international brand of food and beverages, to start a marketing or promotional campaign throughout the world by utilizing the communication channel of social media. The marketers believe that this advertisement and promotional plan would give maximum reach and exposure to the products of this brand as promotional content regarding the brand will reach to the people of all ages. Similarly, Coca Cola is implementing two prong marketing strategy for promoting its brand. However, the major focus has largely converted from traditional sources of communication to innovative ones i.e. social media. The enormous target and potential customers are being aimed at through social media by these two global brands. The trend of looking for the information on quality and prices of the products required by online users is increasing among SNSs members.

This trend has accelerated the participation of Internet and social media users in electronic word of Mouth (eWOM) as well as viral marketing. They exchange the information available on blogs, review sites; product pages etc and also share their own experience of purchasing and using a brand to their friends and relatives for different purposes. The comments on utility, quality and price of a particular product or brand build the opinion of the potential customers and positive comments may lead towards larger market share for that particular product (Smith, 2010). DEI report (2008) examined the effectiveness of social media marketing and concluded that this type of marketing had significant effect on the purchasing behavior of the online customers and social media marketing plans of the business organization may largely influence the opinion by sharing promotional messages and comments. A similar study was carried out by Thackeray et al. (2008) who conducted an online survey to demonstrate the effectiveness of marketing through social media. The results showed that Internet users collected information from social media regarding products or services before buying the products or services of a brand and relied heavily on this information to make the final decision. The information that was posted from a third party proved more influential as compared to the promotional content published by the organization itself. More than 50% percent of the survey participants stated that they made the decision to purchase a product on the basis of information they received from SNSs, blogs and review sites.

The flow of information is run and controlled by users and identification of users who have initiated the information and transmit the information. Therefore, all the SNSs are held responsible for transmission, creation and posting of information.

2.4 Viral Marketing and Social Networking Sites (SNSs)

According to eMarketer (2008), SNSs offer abundant opportunities for online promotion of brands, advertisement campaigns and introduction of new products. The business organizations, by realizing the significance and to grab these opportunities, have made exponential additions in their social marketing budgets in last 3 to 5 years. So far, the US firms are leading in social media marketing on SNSs and their total budgets on this type of marketing have crossed \$2.5 billion limit in the year 2009. The two ways of communication and unique facilities like interactive tools of Web 2.0 technology on the social media enable the potential customers to acquire as well as provide knowledge, information or advice for purchase of a product or use of a service.

The SNSs members can also become fan of a product by liking the page of a business, a brand or a product. This makes the end consumers and potential customers an explicitly associated friend or fan of the brand. These customers voluntarily expose themselves to the promotional messages posted on the product page since they always look for interesting, valuable and updated information about the brand of their interest. They voluntarily pass on this information to their friends and contact list and create a true as well as highly interactive eWOM or viral marketing. An established social network is already available to the members of SNSs and there exists perceived familiarity among the contacts and friends. As a result, the information shared is perceived to be more reliable and credible by the contacts and they also share it with their contacts as trustworthy information.

The reason for referring viral marketing as word of mouse lies in the fact that it involves multiplication of product related messages from the manufacturers or marketers in the shape of cells. To understand the rapid dissemination and propagation of promotional content on social media, consider the example of computer viruses that occupies the major machinery or nucleus of the cells and their multiplication occurs through utilization of cells' resources. Cakim (2010) reported that promotional messages and product related information execute virus bidding after capturing resources of different online communities and social groups. In this way, promotional

messages make viral movement going from peer to peer or from one to other online members of social networking sites. Gil – Or (2010) carried out investigation on the importance of social media and its effectiveness as a marketing medium. He reported that SNSs were the most effective and economical medium of marketing for business organizations. These sties only require the firms and companies to start the marketing process by uploading their promotional messages or product related information that is useful for the customers. After this, the target consumers on the social media websites control the propagation of the message or promotional information through one click of the mouse (the word of mouse). Therefore, the involvement and engagement of the consumers is vital for the successful viral marketing.

Role of social media in marketing and its use as marketing tool has been investigated by the researchers and practitioners in the field of marketing in recent past (e.g. Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Valenzuela et al., 2009; Boyd and Ellison, 2008). Email was the most frequent online activity in the last decade of twentieth century but social media has outpaced it in the beginning of the 21st century. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social exposure of Internet and dissemination of promotional content by the social networkers has become the leading online activity.

On a SNS, the members can get and share ideas, get required information, post opinions, exchange personal experience and their perspective about particular brands and their products. Astonishing augmentation in the use of social media was reported by Zarrella (2010). According to him, 142 million people used SNSs and blogs and blogs in USA, 31 million in Brazil, 11 million in Australia and 46 million in Japan were involved in social networking. It was also reported that more than 70% of the Internet users throughout the world prefer social media for interaction. According to ComScore (2009), use of SNSs by online Internet users for social interaction has been persistently increasing. ComScore (2010) reported that two third of the active social media users participate in sharing information and discussions with their links, friends and relatives. The report evidently illustrates the exponentially increasing trends of using SNSs in the UK.

These trends have resulted in the conversion of consumers from traditional media (e.g. TV, newspapers and Radio) to social. Facebook.com is by far the largest social networking site and number of its members is substantially increasing with the passage of time. Like other regions of

the world, business organizations operating in the UK look towards SNSs as huge platform for promotion of their services and products.

Facts and stats discussed above illustrate that social media is the prospect of marketing because people are continuously moving towards social media. According to Dholakia and Durham (2010), social media may take over the traditional media and it will have the power of making or breaking a brand and products under it. This media provides vast access to the target customers through online communities, groups, review sites and blogs, websites, social networks and discussion groups.

The evaluation of viral marketing has been carried out on three different aspects including opinion seeking, open sharing and opinion giving. All these aspects are soul of the process of viral marketing on SNSs. According to Norman and Russel (2006), transmission of information or opinion sharing behavior is the key for SNSs based word of mouth. The same was emphasized by Sun et al. (2006) who reported that sharing of product related information is vital element of social media marketing. They also reported that sharing, giving and seeking opinion is enhanced on SNSs due to the particular environment provided by Web 2.0 technology.

2.4.1 Viral Marketing and Social Relationships

The review of theory on viral marketing shows that consumer's desire to establish and strengthen the social relationships also act as precursor for his engagement in sharing information. To comprehensively understand the process of viral marketing and determinants of consumer's involvement in eWOM and word of mouse marketing, the variables affecting social relationship is necessary. Many researchers (e.g. Smith et al., 2007 and Gilly et al., 1998) explored referral behaviors in eWOM. Some factors like tie strength, trust, interpersonal influence, homophily etc. are main variables that influence social relationship and viral marketing (Nisbet, 2006; Brown et al., 2007).

Tie strength was exclusively studied by Steffes and Burgee (2009) who reported significant association between tie strengths and engagement of college students in word of mouse. Purchase intention and decision of the college students was significantly influenced by factors such as familiarity and reliability of the shared information or opinion. There are different results regarding the significance of tie strength. According to Steffes and Burgee (2009), the weak ties

e.g. strangers and familiar people may have strong influence (i.e. the information shared by the expert (strangers) showed high impact on purchasing intentions) when compared with strong ties such as family members, relatives, or friends.

Homophily is another variable that significantly affected evaluation of products or brands by the consumers (Brown et al. 2007). Social media provides the opportunity to give feedback to the consumers that helps others to evaluate it and make purchase decisions. Positive feedback can act as effective word of mouth when placed and shared on the SNSs (Dellarocas, 2003).

Interpersonal influence is another important construct that acquired the attention of the researchers (Chu & Kim, 2011). According to many studies (e.g. Treadaway & Smith, 2010; Evans, 2008), interpersonal influence is an influential variable that impacts purchasing behavior of the members of social networks who are involved in viral marketing. (Chu & Kim, 2011) presented a model of different variables that engage the consumers in the process of viral marketing and make it an effective marketing process for the business organizations. The model includes two types of interpersonal influence, namely normative and informational, in addition to the constructs of tie strength, homophily and trust. The model includes all the basic variables i.e. seeking, giving and sharing information on the social media. The model proposed by Chu & Kim (2011) is illustrated below. The hypothesized relationship between and among various variables can be clearly seen.

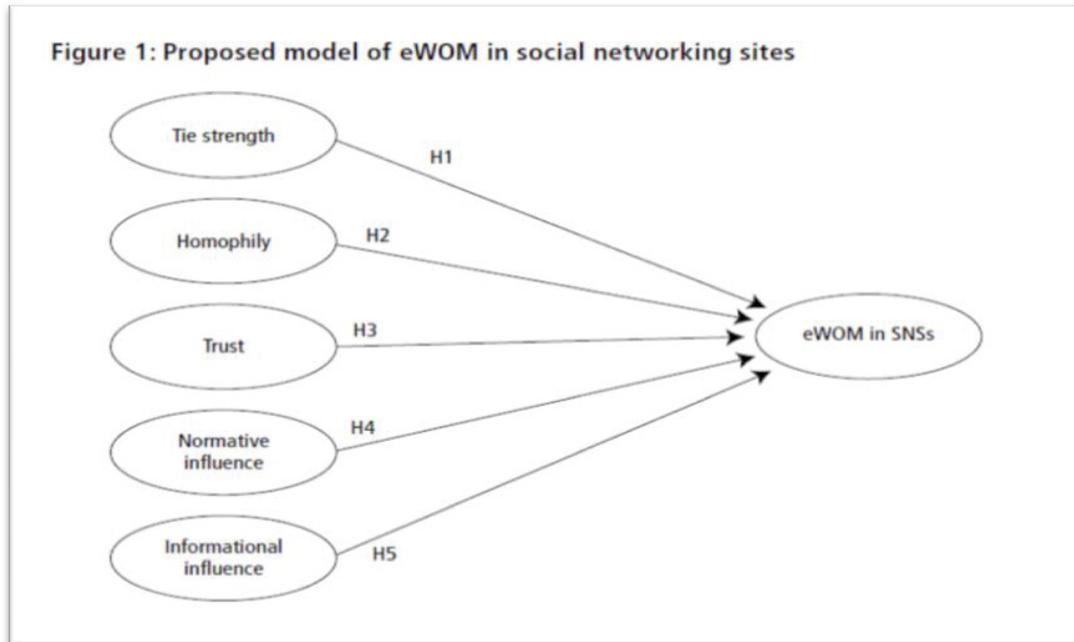


Figure 1: Model of Engagement of Consumers in eWOM in SNSs (Source: Chu and Kim, 2011)

The trends in marketing are also changing and practitioners are making their strategies on the basis of social causes instead of traditional causes for attracting more and more customers. Social media allows them to reach directly to their target customers. Many researchers (e.g. Evans, 2008) have explored the importance of this media and viral marketing for the customers but literature lacks the research on the determinants or factors that play vital role in engaging the consumers to participate in viral marketing. Keeping the incessantly escalating use of social media and its social and communal features, the objective of this study is to explore determinants of the UK consumer's involvement in process of exchanging information among the users of social networks. This process of sharing information is referred to as viral marketing (Treadaway and Smith, 2010; Evans, 2008). It explores various factors that are responsible for the involvement of the UK consumers in viral marketing or word of mouse from the perspective of university students.

Tie strength refers to the influence or power of a relation or bond among different members of a social network (Mittal et al. 2008). The tie strength may be strong or it may be weak. Strong tie strengths include family members, friends or relatives, all relations that are intimate and are

source of emotional as well as substantial support to different individuals (Pigg and Crank, 2004). On the other side, weak tie strengths refers to less intimate relations like office colleagues or other known people. Weak tie strengths also act as a substantial source of information for the opinion seekers at the social networking sties (Pigg and Crank, 2004). Thus, it can be hypothesized that:

H1: The relationship and familiarity (Tie Strength) of the UK consumers as members of SNSs positively affect the level of involvement of the consumers in exchanging information regarding different products, services or brands on SNSs.

Other factor is the trust among the online SNS members that is known to positively influence eWOM. Pigg and Crack (2004) defined it as the motivation possessed by an individual to act upon or follow the advice, opinion or information provided by other individual. Trust has vital role in motivating the people to exchange their opinion, information or views regarding a product or brand (Ridings et al. 2002). It was hypothesized that:

H2: Interaction on SNSs among the users of social media leads towards development of trust on their friends, relatives and links. The trust among the members of social networks has positive impact on their information sharing activity and viral marketing.

According to Chu and Kim (2011), many researches focusing word of mouth marketing revealed the significance of interpersonal influence. According to D'Rozario and Choudhury (2000), interpersonal influence is leading factors that affect the decision of the consumers to purchase or leave a brand. Muk (2007) conducted investigation on both types, normative and informational interpersonal influence, of interpersonal influence and concluded that innovative brands or products heavily depend on the interpersonal influence. It refers to the eagerness of the people to execute the expectations that others have from them. So, one hypothesis was also formed to examine the importance of interpersonal influence and informational influence as one of the major determinant of involvement of the UK consumers in this process.

H3: The receptiveness of the UK consumers towards normative influence has positive impact on their involvement in word of mouse.

H4: The UK consumers love to share novel information and up to date news regarding different products, brand and services available in the market. The love of sharing knowledge and the

receptiveness of the consumers to love of sharing and their receptiveness to pose them as knowledgeable persons

Gilly *et al.* (1998) defined homophily as the existence of similar attributes or qualities among different members of the SNSs. The similarities in opinion, liking, disliking, demographics such as education, age, gender, behaviors and any other attribute may result in increased homophily among the social network users. People have the tendency to socialize with those sharing most of the social attributes with them. It is social homophily, people involved are called homophilous and there are increased chances of development of strong tie strengths among the homophilous individuals (Mouw, 2006).

H5: The perceived homophily among members of SNSs, especially with their friends and contacts. The perceived homophily has positive association with their active participation in viral marketing.

Chapter – 3 Methodology

The purpose of methodology chapter is to provide comprehensive detail of the research design as well as research strategy selected for collection and analysis of data to identify the major determinants of consumer's engagement in information sharing on social networking sites. The chapter also describes how the research topic was identified, selected and how research hypotheses or questions were structured during the course of this research. It entails different sources of evidence as well as process of data collection in relation to the relevance of the sources and how they helped in answering the research question. In the end, the chapter presents the arguments related to the reliability and validity of the data. Complete overview of research work and different phases or stages of the research are also described in this chapter. The study was based on comprehensive review of literature with questionnaire based survey being used for the current study. All the activities (i.e. from the selection of topic to presentation and interpretation of results) were carried out in a chronological order on timely manner.

3.1 Research Strategy and Design

As reported by Saunders et al. (2009), research methodology collectively represents all the basic beliefs, underlying concepts and ideas and methods utilized for compilation, appraisal and manipulation of data. The determination of major factors that affect the engagement of end users and potential customers is the basic objective of this study. Epistemology and doxology are traditional research philosophies; the first describes the facts that are generally conventional and are accepted; the second entails the investigation or observation of a phenomenon to reveal facts about it (Berg, 2007). This study uses the doxological approach to reach the epistemology because it involves analyzing the key determinants of engagement of the UK consumers in the process of seeking, giving and exchanging ideas and opinions on the SNSs. Through doxological approach, the research tries to find the facts that are supported by empirical data or qualitative evidence. Positivism and interpretivism are the two further classes of epistemology; positivistic research philosophy was followed during the course of current investigation because it involved collection of data regarding the engagement in viral marketing from the members of different social networks.

It is an established fact that consumers are involved in the process of sharing and exchanging promotional content on product pages and websites. This fact or natural occurring is the event or phenomenon under study and it was narrowed down to the perspective of the university student in the UK because the review of statistics regarding the use of social media in the UK revealed that 95% of the young people in the UK were involved in this activity (ComScore, 2011). This group was targeted to collect data regarding the major factors that affected their involvement and activity on SNSs.

Positivism is justified because the current study was conducted by collection of primary data from the sample of 105 randomly selected university students through online survey method. The same philosophy was used when Chu and Kim (2011) analyzed the determinants of involvement of consumers in viral marketing. Marketers and researchers utilize two research options that are primary and secondary research. Saunders et al. (2007) reported that primary researches generally are associated with the assortment of primary data through experimentation, field research, surveys and interviews. This results in the evolution of existing theories or the formation of new theories. Therefore, a lot of reliable and valid primary data is needed in this type of marketing research. The researchers followed primary research and were quantitative in nature. The quantitative is justifiable as the primary research is mostly associated with quantitative research as described by Miller-Cochran and Rodrigo (2008). The secondary research approach was not used because it is based on the secondary data as stated by Crouch and Housdon (2003).

To analyze what the major factors or determinants affecting the involvement or engagement of the UK consumers in social networking and eWOM marketing, the current study started with review of literature pertinent to marketing through social media, electronic word of mouth and word of mouse. On the basis of this review, the topic of the study was selected and refined again and again through in depth analysis and study of the literature relevant to viral marketing. Once, the topic, “*Analyzing the determinants of the UK consumer's engagement in Viral Marketing on Social Networking Sites: A university Student's perspective*” was selected, researchers consulted different sources like libraries, online libraries, journal articles, books and reports that were relevant to the selected topic to understand the major concepts of this phenomenon and formulate hypotheses.

The focus was on the most recent literature available on eWOM. The review helped in the identification of the major factors that induce the online social network members to participate in promotion of content available on the SNSs regarding their favorite brands or products to their family members, friends, contact lists and fans on the product page. The hypotheses were structured by using different theories proposed by different experts and academicians. According to Saunders et al. (2009), the studies following positivism involve formulation of hypothesis by utilizing in depth review of existing theories and models relevant to the topic. Quantitative data was acquired in this research by using questionnaire based survey method. The mentioned questionnaire was emailed by the researchers to more than 100 participants from different universities of the UK.

The research design follows the design applied by Chu and Kim (2011) who explored and investigated various key factors impacting involvement of social media users in eWOM. A similar approach and design was implemented by these researchers for the evaluation of determinants that induce or motivate the online members of social networks to contribute in viral marketing.

From above discussion, the research design is clear that the research is quantitative in nature, follows the positivist philosophy and primary research. Moreover, the study finds a strong origin in existing literature. By considering the above facts, deductive research approach was chosen by the researchers as it best suited the research. According to Saunders et al. (2007), deductive approach requires collection of quantitative as well as primary data and aims at finding the relationship among the variables under study.

In the current study, the involvement of online social networkers in viral marketing is the major phenomenon and key variables and their effect on this phenomenon that is being evaluated include tie strength, familiarity, trust, perceived homophily and perceived interpersonal influence (i.e. both normative and informational interpersonal influence). The importance of these variables and their motivational effect on the online activity of social networkers was analyzed. According to Bryman and Bell (2007) and Saunders et al. (2009), the establishment of relation between independent variables and dependent variables and compilation of data are the two key features of a deductive research. The arguments given above justify the use of deductive research

approach for conducting research on determinants of consumer's engagement in the social media marketing and eWOM.

In light of the findings of Saunders et al. (2009) that deductive approach is accompanied by measuring the key concepts as well as variables and aims at generalization of results from specific to general, current research fulfills the criteria required for selection of deductive approach. From above discussion, the research design, research philosophy, approach and methodology adopted for the current study is reasonable. However, the suitability of quantitative approach for evaluation of the impact of different determinants including reliability of information, homophily, interpersonal influence, familiarity and trust among the members of the SNSs is given in the lines below.

3.1.1 Quantitative Research Approach and its Justification

The emphasis and focus of the research was to analyze the major determinants or variables that affect the consumer's engagement or contribution in viral marketing. Therefore, the research approach adopted was quantitative that is suited best where establishment of relationship among different types of variables is required. Certain variables are responsible for motivating the social media users to look for opinion of their contacts before purchasing a product or hiring a service. Abundant information about a product, brand or service is available online in the form of reviews, comments, blogs, social networking discussion groups and product or brand pages.

Bryman and Bell (2007) emphasized that finding relationship among different variables needed numerical data. Therefore, finding association among variables mentioned above also required numerical data. As a result, the quantitative research approach was chosen to fulfill the requirements of the research. The qualitative approach was not followed as it involved non – quantifiable variables that require interpretive analysis and narrative approach and data collected through this approach do not fit the statistical analysis. The outline of research process followed to carry out this research is given below (Fig. 2). This process is based on chosen research philosophy (i.e. positivism), research design, approach (i.e. qualitative and deductive), and data collection methods (questionnaire based survey).

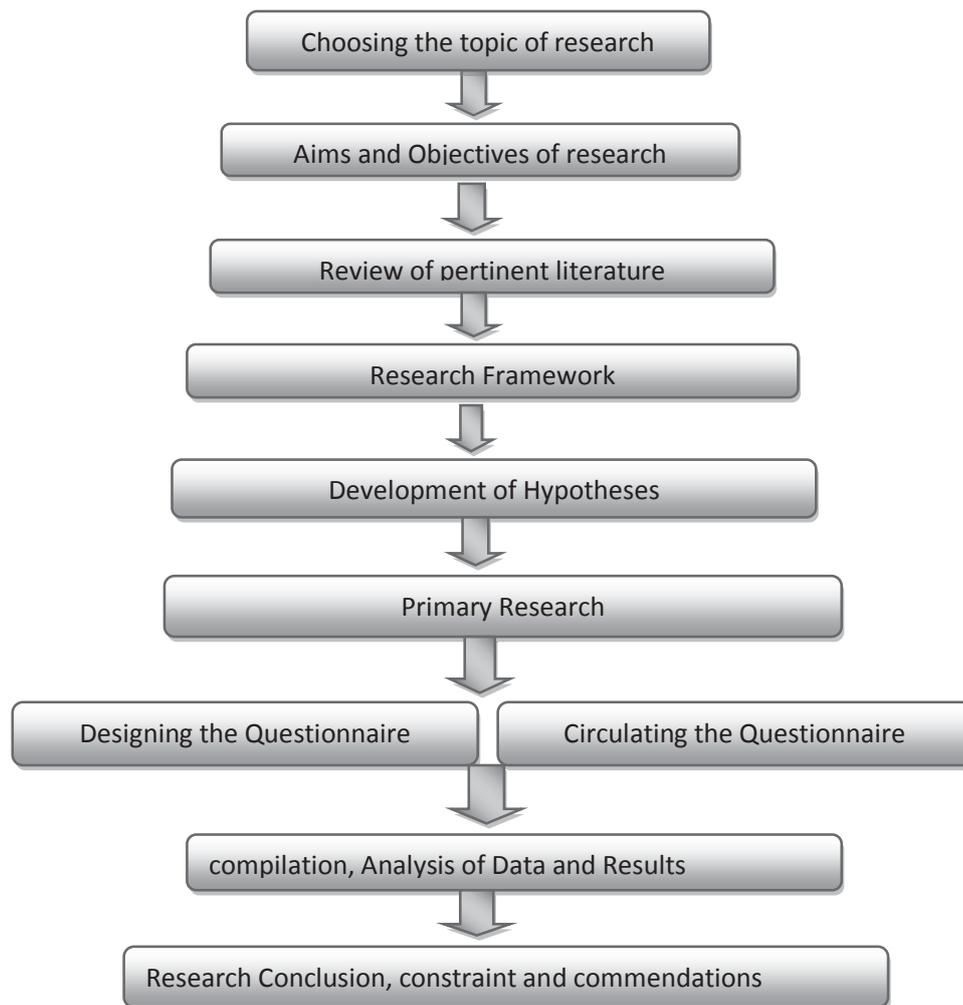


Figure 2: Research process to be followed in the proposed research

3.2 Sampling Technique and Data Collection Methods

Keeping the key objectives of the study in view, the key focus is on the UK consumers that are target customers for all the business organizations operating in the UK either in manufacturing or service industry. Among the consumers, the youth is focused by involving the university students in this research to know what factors are responsible for their immense activity and information sharing on the SNSs like Facebook and Twitter. The questionnaire survey method was chosen for collecting data from the students. Since survey was based on close ended questionnaire (section 2.2.1), the data was quantitative and was conveniently subjected to statistical analysis for analyzing the major determinants of consumer's activity on the SNSs that is soul of the viral marketing.

Saunders et al. (2007) concluded that data collected with the instruments like close ended questionnaire were appropriate to be analyzed through quantitative techniques. Saunders et al. (2009) confirmed utility of online survey as one of the most economic and practical techniques for practitioners to gather primary data. This method is also known for helping the researcher to gather a lot of primary data from relatively smaller sample, i.e. a representative portion of the complete population under investigation.

Purposive sampling i.e. a type of non-probability sampling was applied to sample 130 university students from different universities of the UK and they were requested to participate in the study and help in the collection of primary data regarding the determinants that motivate them to engage in the activity of viral marketing. Saunders et al. (2007) stated that purposive sample is appropriate sampling technique for the studies that require specific data for achieving the aims of the research. The population as well as sample is selected in light of the major objectives of the study and the people who retain maximum information regarding the particular topic. This sampling technique is justified in the current research as 95% of the young people in the UK have active accounts at facebook.com as mentioned in the first chapter. Therefore, they are supposed to have the information regarding the factors that motivate them to share information and participate in viral marketing for the business organizations. Due to online survey method of data collection, convenience sampling was used for selection of the 130 students so that researchers can access the sampled students and get their consent for participation. Saunders et al. (2009) supported the use of convenience sampling in survey based researches as it makes the

research process more economical and time saving. Saunders et al. (2009) also stated a drawback of this sampling technique; it may result in the introduction of biasness. However, convenience sampling is the most commonly used technique by marketing experts.

To implement this data collected technique, consent letters were emailed to all (130) the students selected with the help of above mentioned sampling technique. The researchers mailed the questionnaire to all (105) students who showed consent for the participation. The researchers tried to make the questionnaire as simple and convenient as possible. It was also requested to the participants to email the researchers in case of any confusion or leave the question. The first paragraph of the questionnaire explained the purpose and meaning of the questionnaire to the participants to make it as simple as possible. This strategy helped a lot in attaining appropriate and more accurate answers from the participants of this research. The data collection technique is justifiable as the online surveys have been considered effective method of gathering primary data, especially in marketing research (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

3.2.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire (Appendix 1) formulated for the current research was based on the review of literature. It contained two parts; first part entailed the questions regarding the demographics of the participants while the second part contained close-ended questions about major factors that might affect the engagement of the UK consumers in viral marketing. Five major factors including tie strength, trust, familiarity, interpersonal influence and homophily were identified from available literature on the eWOM. One or two questions related to each factor were asked in the questionnaire. A brief description of all these factors is given in the theory chapter.

Every aspect factor discussed and defined above was explained and relevant questions were included in the questionnaire in the close-ended format to analyze these factors and their role in engagement of the UK customers in social media activity called viral marketing.

3.3 Data Analysis and Presentation Strategy

According to Bryman and Cramer (2005), hypothesis testing and analyzing data for the confirmation of hypothesis is one of the challenging tasks for the academicians. The first step to analyze the data for testing hypotheses is to determine the factors or variables that are involved in the measurement of the phenomenon under study. It was done by identifying several factors

that affect the engagement of the customers in online social media marketing, especially the word of mouse. The second step is to identify and separate the dependent and independent variables in order to use appropriate statistical analysis through computer software programs that are especially designed for conducting analysis of the quantitative data.

The data acquired for each variable in response to the questionnaire was manipulated by entering it into the variable and data view of the SPSS 17.1.1 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 17.1.1). After entering the data, descriptive analysis of the data for all the variables and demographics of the participants was carried out through the descriptive stats function of the above-mentioned program. After analyzing the descriptive nature of the data, bivariate analysis of the same data was performed by using two or more dependent and an independent variable to analyze it for the correlation between different variables. The results, both from descriptive as well as bivariate analysis, obtained from the analysis of the data were recorded, interpreted and illustrated in graphical or tabulated form for better and more convenient understanding of the results. Correlation analysis for different factors affecting the engagement of consumers present on the social networking sites in the process of viral marketing or word of mouse marketing through sharing promotional content published by the business organizations about certain products and services.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007), the term reliability refers to all the methods chosen or selected for analyzing data and the precision of these methods. One of the commonly applied techniques to measure or assess the reliability of a study is to measure the stability factor. Bryman and Bell (2007) explained that stability of the measurement of a variable is established if the measure gives same values or the values with little variation are computed again and again. So, redoing the same calculation and getting similar values with less variation proves that the method being used for the data collection is reliable.

On the other hand, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) described validity as the term that refers to accuracy of primary data, relevance and accuracy of the questions included the questionnaire and accuracy of the conclusion. In other words, it expresses whether the variables are measured as accurately as claimed by the researchers or not. Byrman and Bell (2007) also suggested two other criteria for assessing the validity and reliability of the quantitative research. These include

authenticity of the data and second method is to check the trustworthiness of the data by examining the research strategy and approach followed during the research. Trustworthiness is more suited for the qualitative studies as compared to the quantitative research in the field of marketing. Credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability are the various equivalents of trustworthiness in quantitative research (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The observations or data collection during this investigation were made through online survey with the students and the generalization of these results to the whole population of consumers can be improved by increasing the size of sample taken. The main focus of the investigation and questionnaire was to know the understanding of the university students as consumers about the factors affecting their involvement in the social networks and their activity of sharing information with others.

Marketing literature was abundant and easy to assess but the accuracy and reliability of the viral marketing data was difficult due to the novelty of the subject. Stability of the research can be assessed using Pearson coefficients (Saunders et al. 2009). The other method is to test and retest the research if it is repeated using different population and sample size and checking the level of similarity between the two results. Internal reliability of a quantitative research might be assessed through correlation of performance with two halves a test.

Validity of a research is evaluated by checking the results and assessing whether the major objectives of the research has been achieved or not. The pertinence of content in the thesis suggests about the validation of content. The pertinence of the research hypotheses was also evaluated in light of the objectives and variables under study. As stated by Bryman and Bell (2007), the reliability and dependability factor of the research can be secured by maintaining a comprehensive record of all the activities carried out and by using auditing approach so that each and everything can be assessed by peers of the field. The researchers or the peers can audit the whole research process if the initial and revised versions of thesis, proposal, interviews, notes and all other pertinent documents (Bryman and Cramer, 2005). Therefore, the researchers have maintained complete record of all the activities of this research.

3.5 Research Ethics

In order to discuss the ethical concerns that were confronted during this research, ethical approval guidelines for the online survey based marketing research were followed. The thesis

made use of secondary data through review of literature for consulting different theories about viral marketing and engagement of consumers in the eWOM that helped towards formulation of hypothesis for the current research. At the start of research, the consent letter containing details about the purpose of this research and use of data gathered from this research was sent to the sampled university students through electronic mail and they were only sent the questionnaire once they showed consent to take part in the research. All the secondary data utilized was thoroughly referenced and participation of all the previous researches for the success of this study was acknowledged. No physical harm was associated with the conduction of online survey for the participants. However, the confidentiality about the demographics of the participants was considered a serious question and they were assured that no access would be granted to anyone except the researchers to the names or any other identifiable attribute.

Chapter 4 – Analysis of Data

To identify and analyze the key factors that affected consumers from the UK to participate in the viral marketing on social networks, primary data was collected by the researchers via questionnaire based survey. The data analysis chapter is structured with the aims of manipulating the collected data with the help of SPSS 17, answer the main research question and confirm the hypotheses formulated and presented in the first chapter. The analysis of data is presented tabulated as well as graphical form and is interpreted to answer the research questions.

The analysis of data is presented in two different sections. Firstly, it presents the univariate analysis of all the variables that were defined as the main factors to affect the involvement of the consumers in viral marketing. The next section entails the bivariate analysis that looks for correlation among different factors. The results of the analysis are depicted through tables and graphs while the results are also interpreted in both of these sections. Finally, the chapter presents a summary of the analysis of primary data.

4.1 Univariate Analysis of Data

As described in the questionnaire section of the methodology chapter, demographic attributes including age and gender of the participants was asked and data was analyzed regarding these two attributes. The SPSS data view was used to enter the primary data regarding these variables and descriptive tools were applied to analyze the data. The descriptive analysis of gender (Fig. 3) showed that almost 43% of the participants were females while the remaining 57% of the students who took part in the research were males. These stats show that there was no significant difference in the gender wise participation. Almost equal representation from both genders helped to reduce the gender bias in the results of the current research. The frequency, cumulative frequency, percent and valid percent of the gender data are illustrated below (Table 1).

Table 1: Analysis of Gender data

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	60	57.1	57.1	57.1
	Female	45	42.9	42.9	100.0
	Total	105	100.0	100.0	

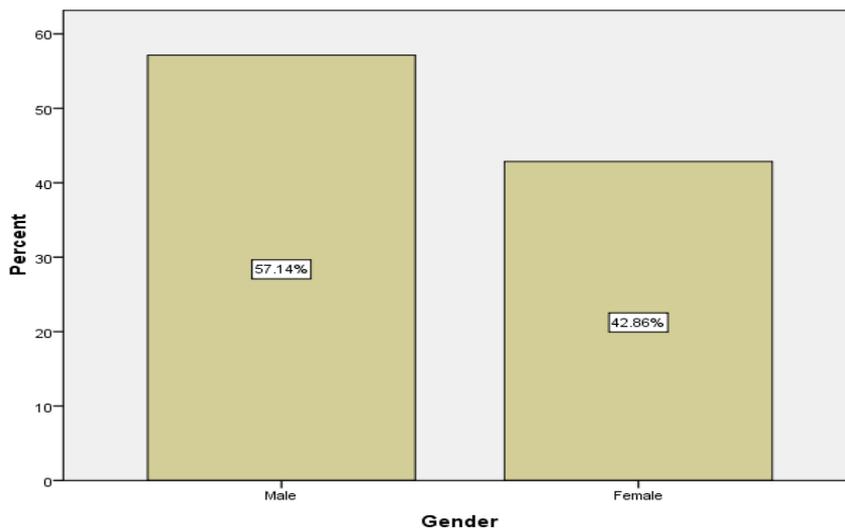


Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Participants (University Students from the UK)

The age of the participants was also asked in the second question; the target population (students of different universities of the UK) was divided into four age groups starting from below 20 years to more than 30 years old. The analysis of age data revealed that approximately 15% of the participants were less than 20 years old, 40% of the participants aged between 21 and 25 years, 21% of the participants were 26 to 30 years old and approximately 24% of the participants were more than 30 years of age. The age distribution shows that sample population was evenly

distributed and effectively represented the population of the UK university students. The analysis of age distribution is illustrated in the following table (Table 2) and figure 4.

Table 2: Age distribution of the participants

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Below 20	16	15.2	15.2	15.2
21 - 25	42	40.0	40.0	55.2
26 - 30	22	21.0	21.0	76.2
Above 30	25	23.8	23.8	100.0
Total	105	100.0	100.0	

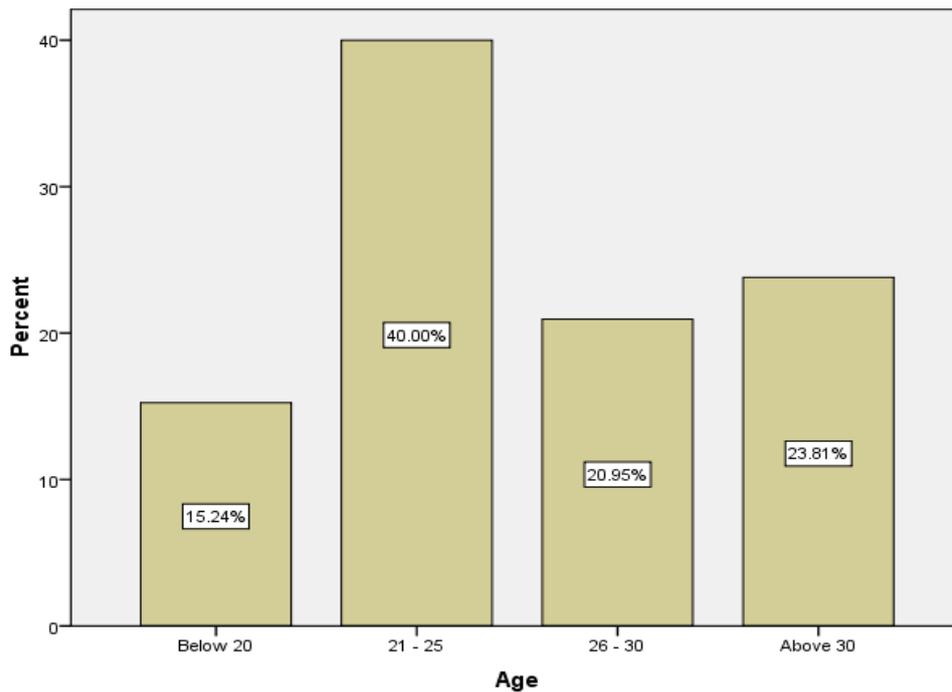


Figure 3: Age Distribution of the University Students from the UK

In the second section of the questionnaire, the first question was related to the use of social networking sites by the university student. From review of literature, it was identified that

Facebook, Twitter, Orkut, LinkedIn and Ibibio were the most famous SNSs in the UK. The participants were asked to select the SNS they used mostly. The analysis showed that approximately 67% of the students used Facebook.com; almost 22% were using Twitter.com while 7%, 4% and 1% reported that they had active profiles on the Orkut, LinkedIn and Ibibio respectively. The following figure and table provides the tabular as well as graphical representation of the results.

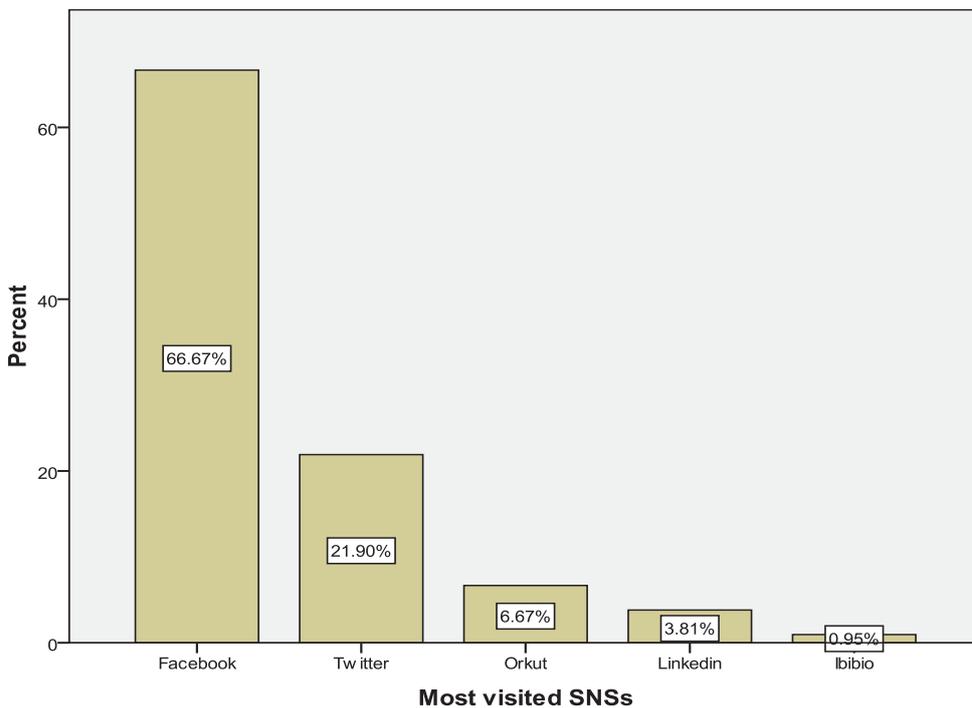


Figure 4: Use of different Social Networking Sites by the Participants

The results illustrated above provide similar results as the stats provided by ComScore (2011) and media reports about the popularity and healthy usage of Facebook.com; it is considered as the most rapidly growing SNS and serves as the largest marketing tool through word of mouse. Moreover, it also indicates the amount of exposure social media has attained in the UK. The access of this media to more and younger consumers indicates its significance. This exposure and access to the UK consumers make these networks an interesting and effective platform for the marketing activities. Twitter, as the second largest social media platform, also is very famous among the people. From the above graph, it is evident that it attracts approximately 22% of the

respondents of the survey. It also has the potential to provide access to the far off places as well as the customers that are difficult to reach through traditional modes of marketing because these people are using SNSs for seeking, giving and exchanging information, views and opinions. Google introduced Orkut.com ranks third according to the results acquired in this study as far as UK consumers are interested.

The following table consists of the descriptive statistics for the validity and precision of the data collected for the above described results i.e. gender, age and frequency of using different social networks. The mean value for gender, age and frequency of use are 1.43, 2.53 and 1.50 respectively. The standard error of mean values is very low that describes the low difference in the mean values. Standard deviation (SD) values are ± 0.497 , ± 1.02 and ± 0.856 for gender, age and mostly frequently visited networks respectively. These values of SD are quite low and refer to the precision of the data collected to evaluate these variables. Similarly, the variance values given in the table are low and show the high precision of the data (Table 3).

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of Age, gender and Mostly visited SNSs

		Gender	Age	Most frequently visited SNSs
N	Valid	105	105	105
	Missing	0	0	0
Mean		1.43	2.53	1.50
Std. Error of Mean		.049	.100	.084
Std. Deviation		.497	1.020	.856
Variance		.247	1.040	.733

The respondents were asked to specify the extent of contact they maintained with their friends at the social networks. It was categorized into most frequent, frequent and low or no contact. It constituted the frequency of chat, contact with friends in order to seek some product related information, use of social networks to gather some information, or sharing the information with

the contact lists. The results illustrated that 69.5% of the students from the UK universities most frequently visited their preferred social network and contacted their friends or other contacts in order to acquire information, exchange some information or seek opinion from regarding the products or services they intend to purchase or hire. Approximately 28.5% of the respondents contacted their SNS friends frequently while nearly 2% of the UK consumers reported that they never contacted their friends to acquire this type of information. These results determine that most of the students were involved in uploading, sharing and seeking information from their contacts and considered it a source of new information. These results show that almost 70% of the people have shifted towards social media for discussion as well as information seeking purpose and it contains maximum target consumers. These findings are illustrated in the table and figure given below.

Table 4: Frequency of contact for sharing product related information with friends

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Most frequent	73	69.5	69.5	69.5
Frequent	30	28.6	28.6	98.1
Never	2	1.9	1.9	100.0
Total	105	100.0	100.0	

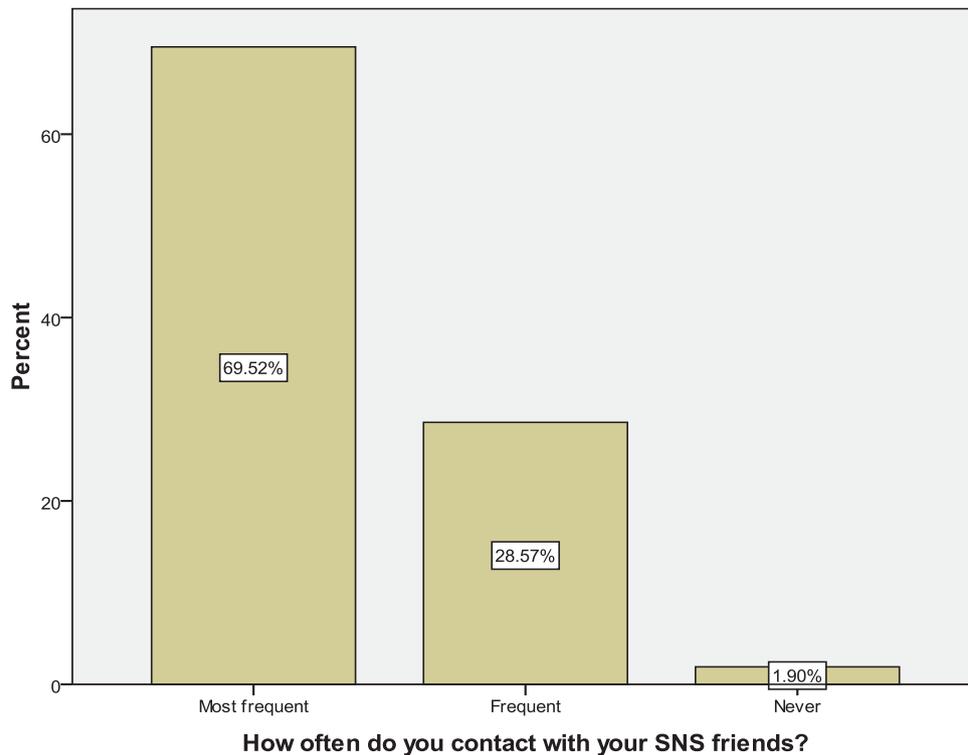


Figure 5: Frequency of contact among social networkers for the online marketing activities

More than 95 % of the respondents are collectively involved in this process on frequent and most frequent basis. The results suggest that UK university students spend considerable time on online activities, especially the social networking sites. Question regarding the tie strength among different members of the SNSs were asked and impact of this factor was measured with the help of data acquired through the current research.

Almost 65 % of the total respondents strongly agreed with this statement and more than 18 % only agreed, whereas 17 % disagreed to the statement and they were of the opinion that they share information with everyone on the social network without considering the Tie strengths. It also illustrates that some social networkers take part in the process of spreading information with strong as well weak tie strengths on equal basis.

The importance of friends list and their role in motivating the social network members was also evaluated through analyzing the data regarding the share, receive and valuation of the information obtained on the SNSs (Fig. 6 and Table 5). According to the analysis, nearly 83% of

the participants considered that friend’s lists on the SNSs were of prime significance for sharing, receiving and valuing information. 17% of the participants agreed to their importance while no participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the value of contact lists on SNSs.

Table 5: Descriptive analysis of significance of friends/contact list on SNSs

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Agree	87	82.9	82.9	82.9
Agree	18	17.1	17.1	100.0
Total	105	100.0	100.0	

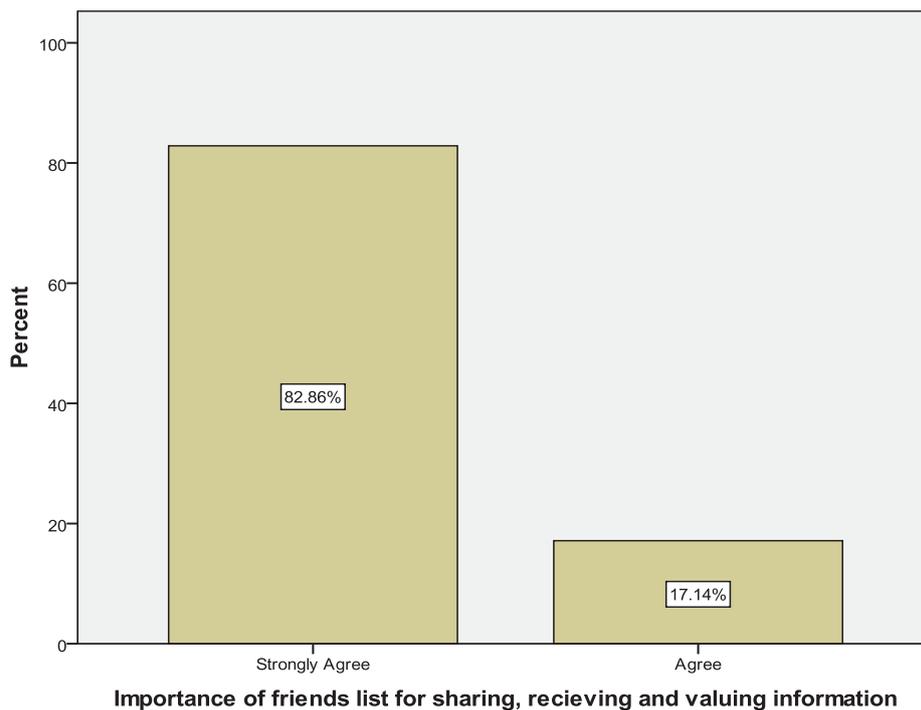


Figure 6: Significance of friends or contact lists on social media

Tie strength was also recognized as the important factor for engaging the participants in information exchange on the SNSs. When asked regarding the significance of tie strength, 67.6%

of the participants were those who agreed to this importance of this factor in sharing, seeking and collecting information to know the facts about products or brands available in the market. 20% of them agreed to this statement, 4.7% disagreed and 7.6% strongly disagreed that tie strength motivates them to participate in word of mouse or viral marketing. Collectively, 87.5% of the participants recognized tie strength's importance as a major determinant that engaged them in viral marketing while only 12.5% were of the view that it did not affect their participants in the process of viral marketing as illustrated below.

Table 6: Tie strength among members of SNSs plays important role in motivating them to participate in viral marketing

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Agree	71	67.6	67.6	67.6
Agree	21	20.0	20.0	87.6
Disagree	5	4.8	4.8	92.4
Strongly Disagree	8	7.6	7.6	100.0
Total	105	100.0	100.0	

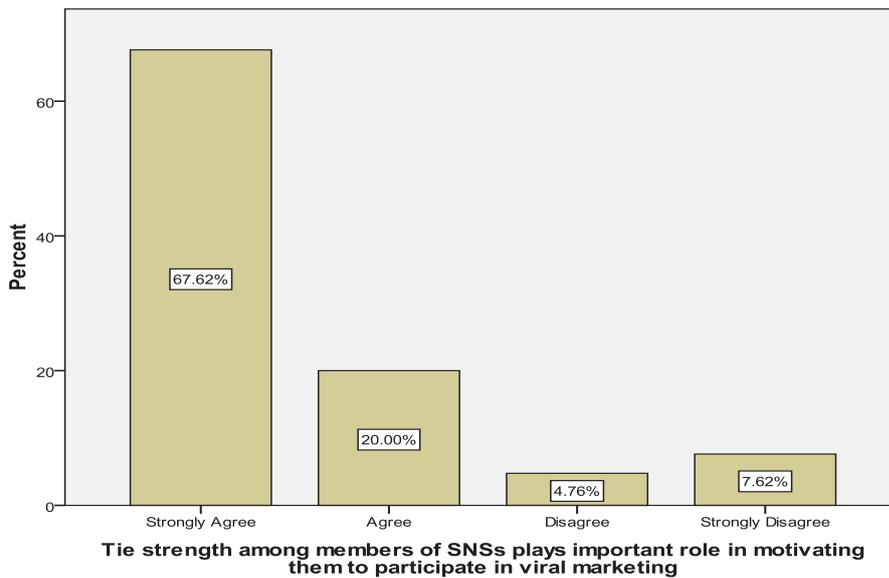


Figure 7: Tie Strength as the major determinant of engagement of consumers in viral marketing

People with similar behavior, habits, liking and disliking, opinions and thoughts like to befriend and this phenomenon is referred as homophily. This phenomenon was also identified to have some impact on the exchange of ideas, opinions and experiences regarding particular products, brand names, services etc by the online consumers. When asked about the significant impact of homophily on the willingness of social network members and consumers to exchange ideas, opinions and information with their homophiles, the following results were revealed by the analysis of data acquired and gathered in response to this question (Fig. 8 and Table 7).

The results depict higher activity and interaction among the members of the SNSs who are homophile of one another. It was revealed that 68.6% of the people strongly considered that homophily was one of the major factors that affected information exchange on these networks. Homophiles befriend with one another and prefer their homophiles when they need to seek information, opinion or ideas about certain products they need to purchase or services they need to hire. About 26% agreed that homophiles befriend more and are willing to exchange information among one another. Approximately 3% of them disagreed to the importance of this phenomenon and 3% strongly disagreed. The overall results revealed that homophily significantly affects behavior of the UK consumers on the SNSs. The decision of the members to

take part in discussion, give or seek opinion and exchange information is highly impacted by the homophily. So, this phenomenon is of prime importance for marketers in order to enhance the value of the word of mouth techniques.

Table 7: Most of the people that befriend on social networks show homophily (similar likes, dislikes and behavior)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly agree	72	68.6	68.6	68.6
Agree	27	25.7	25.7	94.3
Disagree	3	2.9	2.9	97.1
Strongly disagree	3	2.9	2.9	100.0
Total	105	100.0	100.0	

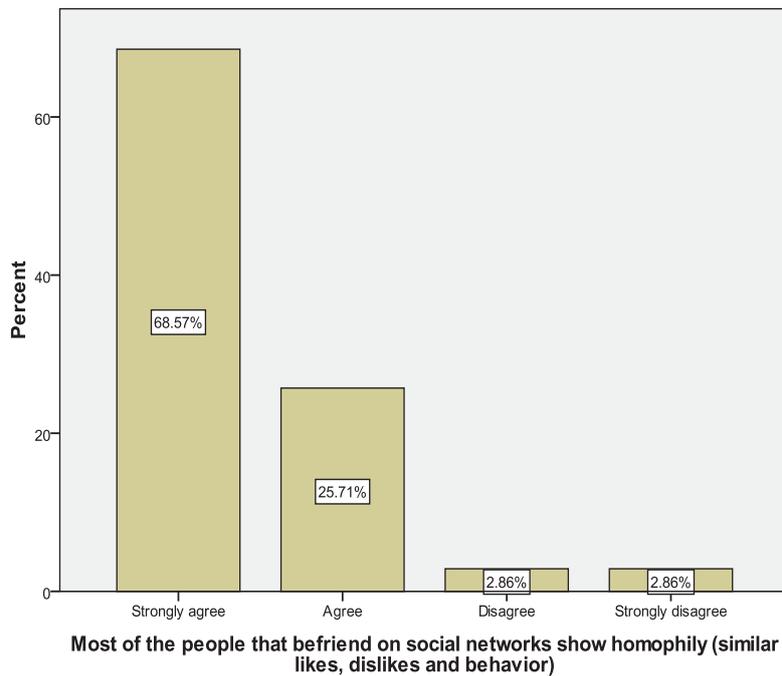


Figure 8: Homophily as Major determinant of engagement of the UK Consumers in Viral Marketing

Table 8 presents the statistical analysis of the data collected for factors including importance of contact lists, friends list, and tie strength as well as homophily that affect the participation of the UK consumers in viral marketing on the SNSs. The values of mean for tie strength are the highest while mean value of friends list is the lowest. The standard deviation values of all the factors are very low that refers to the higher precision and validity of the data. Variance also provides the deviation from the mean and serves the same purpose as the SD. The values of variance are also low and indicative of the low dispersion in the data.

Table 8: Mean, Standard Deviation and Variance for contact, friends list, tie strength and homophily

		How often do you contact with your SNS friends?	Importance of friends list for sharing, receiving and valuing information	Tie strength among members of SNSs plays important role in motivating them to participate in viral marketing	Most of the people that befriend on social networks show homophily (similar likes, dislikes and behavior)
N	Valid	105	105	105	105
	Missing	0	0	0	0
Mean		1.34	1.17	1.52	1.40
Std. Error of Mean		.057	.037	.088	.067
Std. Deviation		.586	.379	.900	.688
Variance		.343	.143	.810	.473

The literature review led towards identification of trust as another construct that might have impacted the consumer’s engagement on social media. To check the impact of this construct on the information sharing behavior and exchange of promotional messages by the university students from the UK, a question was asked in the survey. It was revealed from the current research that most of the participants prefer to consult, discuss, seek opinion and consider the importance of those who were trustworthy for them and their opinion has great importance. Trust also encouraged the participants to seek and give opinions about their personal experiences as well as the products with relatives, friends or the strangers who are experts in relevant fields.

Among the participants, 57% strongly agreed that they seek the opinion and gave importance to the comments and reviews of the SNSs members who were trustworthy i.e. relatives or experts.

Among others, 34% agreed to the importance this construct, 6% disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed to the statement that trust impacts the information sharing behavior on SNSs. Overall, 91% of the UK consumers were of the view that once the trust was developed among the members, it significantly enhanced the consumer’s activity in promoting the information sharing activity i.e. they seek required information and opinion and confidently pass it to their friends who need it. Table 9 and Figure 10 present these results in tabular as well as graphical form.

Table 9: Trust among members of SNSs motivates the exchange of information i.e. information seeking, giving and sharing

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly agree	60	57.1	57.1	57.1
Agree	36	34.3	34.3	91.4
Disagree	6	5.7	5.7	97.1
Strongly disagree	3	2.9	2.9	100.0
Total	105	100.0	100.0	

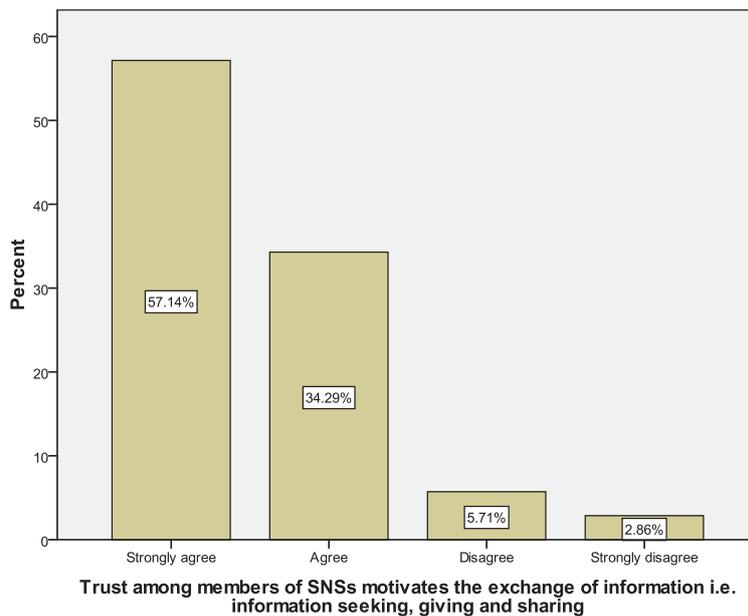


Figure 9: Importance of Trust as a determinant of consumer’s engagement in viral marketing

The role of interpersonal influence was analyzed by including a question relevant to this construct. The participants were asked about the impact of information shared by others (e.g. friends, relatives, experts, members in the contact lists) on their decision to purchase or avoid purchasing a product. According to 83% of the participants, the significance of interpersonal influence on their purchasing behavior is strongly agreed while nearly 7% agreed to this. Only 10% disagreed and stated that their purchasing decisions were not affected by the comments, reviews, discussions and messages on the social media. It means that significant number of the UK consumers is affected by the information shared on the SNSs. The univariate analysis of primary data provided the following results (Fig. 11 and Table 10).

Table 10: Information, opinions and reviews posted by the friends greatly impact the purchasing behavior of the members of SNSs?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly agree	87	82.9	82.9	82.9
Agree	7	6.7	6.7	89.5
Disagree	11	10.5	10.5	100.0
Total	105	100.0	100.0	

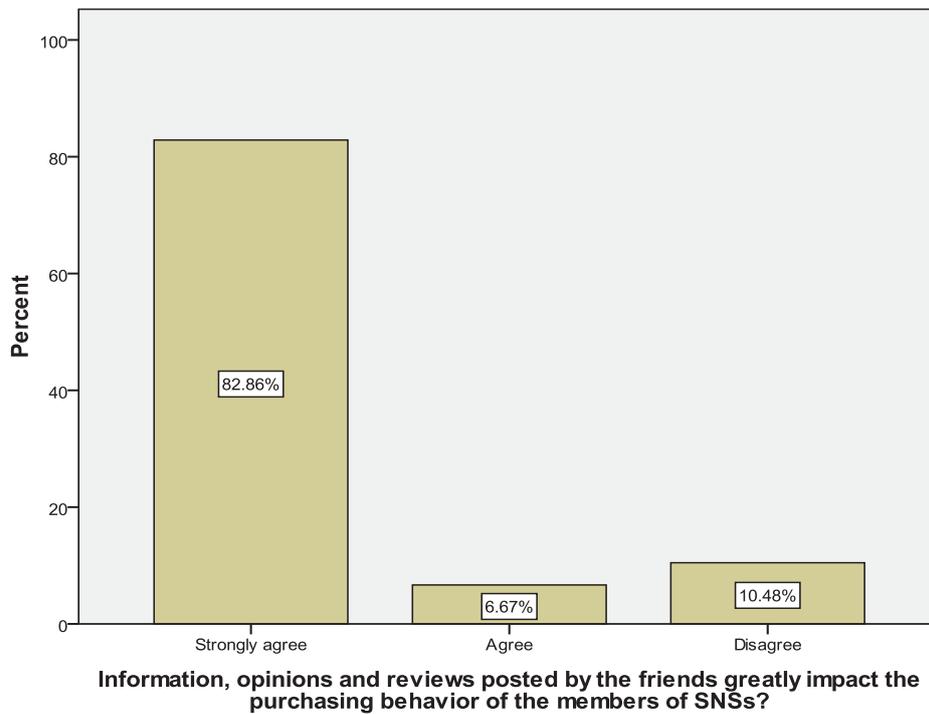


Figure 10: Importance of Normative Influence

The activity of social network users on the social networking sites were categorized into three different types including opinion seekers, givers and passers. The participants were asked to select the most suitable role that they were playing while using the social networking sites. The communication of the promotional messages, exchange of the experience and interpersonal

influence are largely affected by the roles played by the consumers. The results are illustrated in tabular as well as graphical presentation in the following lines (Table 11 and Fig. 11). According to these results, almost 65% of the participants were involved in the viral marketing as the opinion seekers, 26.7% of the respondents categorized themselves as the opinion passers and 8.6% of the participants reported that they played the role of opinion givers in the social networks.

Table 11: What role do you play while using the SNSs?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Opinion Seeker	68	64.8	64.8	64.8
Opinion giver	9	8.6	8.6	73.3
Opinion Passer	28	26.7	26.7	100.0
Total	105	100.0	100.0	

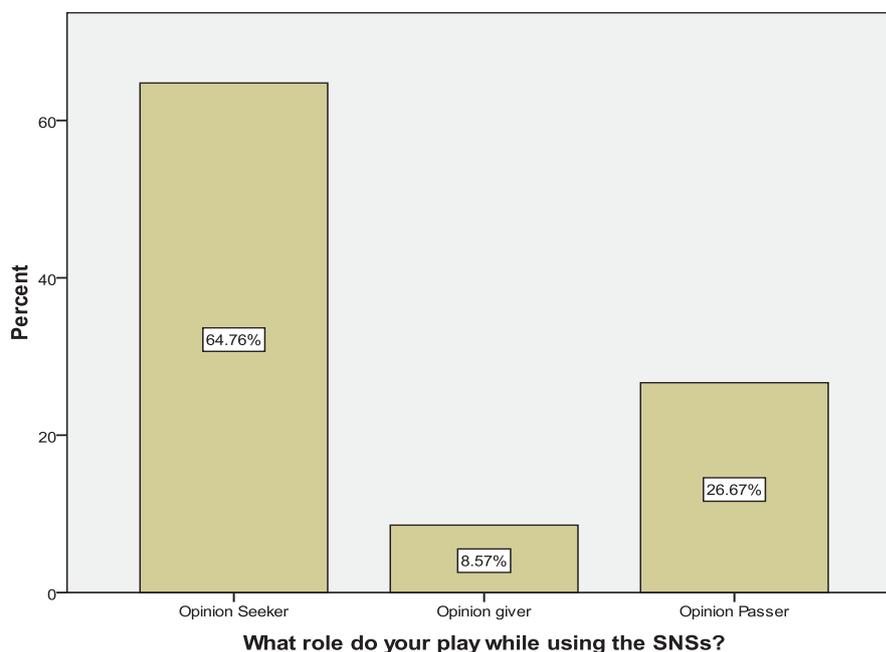


Figure 11: Role played by the respondents in viral marketing

At the end of the questionnaire, a question was asked to evaluate the importance of informative influence in the participation of the UK consumers in the viral marketing activity. The results revealed by data analysis showed that 63% of the students taking part in the study did share the information (product as well as services related) to their friends and confirmed that there is a strong impact of the informative influence while they made decisions to purchase some products from the market. On the other hand, only 37% of them reported no informative influence on their shopping. Table and figure 12 illustrate the descriptive part of the analysis. It is very evident that most of the people engaged in using social networks and acquiring product related reviews and information from this media consult their friends and make purchasing decisions under normative influence as well as informative influence of the person sharing the information.

Table 12: Do you like to share the knowledge about products or services to your friends?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	66	62.9	62.9	62.9
No	39	37.1	37.1	100.0
Total	105	100.0	100.0	

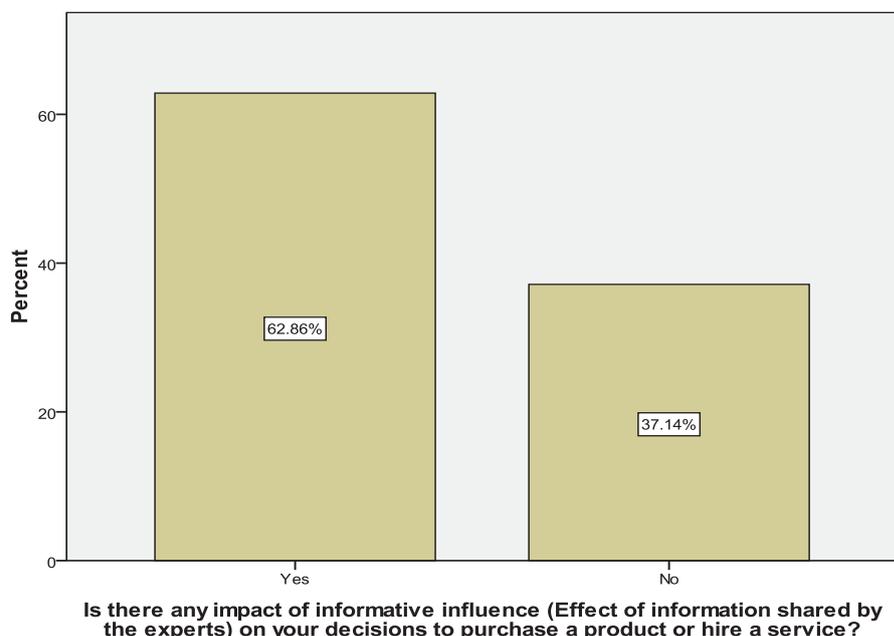


Figure 12: Informative influence and its impact on engagement of consumers in viral marketing

The data was also analyzed for the validity and precision by computing the mean, SD and variance of data collected for different factors including the trust, normative influence, role of the participants while using social networks and informative influence as the main determinants of the involvement of the UK consumers in the process of word of mouse. As described above, the low values of SD for the trust, normative influence, role of the participants and informative influence and impact of information shared by the friends on the purchase decisions are 0.7, 0.6, 0.8, 0.6 and 0.5 respectively indicate low variation from the mean values and high precision of the data collected from the online survey (Table 13).

Table 13: Mean, SD and variance for the trust, normative and informational influence and role of the participants in the viral marketing

		Trust among members of SNSs motivates the exchange of information i.e. information seeking, giving and sharing	Information, opinions and reviews posted by the friends greatly impact the purchasing behavior of the members of SNSs?	What role do you play while using the SNSs?	SNSs members tend to seek product and services related information from their contacts, friends and other members?	Do you like to share the knowledge about products or services to your friends?
N	Valid	105	105	105	105	105
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		1.54	1.28	1.62	1.67	1.39
Std. Error of Mean		.072	.063	.086	.066	.050
Std. Deviation		.734	.643	.881	.675	.509
Variance		.539	.413	.777	.455	.260

All the above graphs and table represent the results obtained from the univariate analysis of different variables in order to confirm the hypothesis formulated to answer the main research question. The following section of the data analysis presents correlation that existed different variables that played important role in engaging the consumers from the UK in viral marketing.

4.2 Correlation

The bivariate correlation analysis was applied on different variables under investigation in this study. The results from correlation statistical analysis are presented in the following tables (Table 13, 14 and 15) and results are interpreted in the following lines.

According to the correlation analysis, gender is negatively correlated with frequency of contact, most visited website and importance of friends list. However, none of these correlations is statistically significant at $p = 0.01$ or 0.05 . Only friends list and frequency of contact was significantly correlated with Pearson value (r) of 0.253 at $p < 0.01$ and sample size (n) of 105 (Table 14).

Table 14: Correlation among gender, most visited SNSs, frequency of contact with friends and importance of friends list

		Gender	Most used Social Networks	Frequency of contact	Friends list are very important for the social networkers on SNSs
Gender	Pearson Correlation	1	-.106	-.179	-.036
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.280	.067	.712
Most used Social Networks	Pearson Correlation	-.106	1	-.061	.146
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.280		.538	.138
Frequency of contact	Pearson Correlation	-.179	-.061	1	.253**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.067	.538		.009
Friends list are very important for the social networkers on SNSs	Pearson Correlation	-.036	.146	.253**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.712	.138	.009	

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

According to the results illustrated in table 15, gender was no significantly correlated with any of the variables including tie strength, trust and homophily. It was found that statistically significant and positive correlation existed between the tie strength and homophily at r value of 0.218 and $p < 0.05$. This relation emphasize that increased tie strength will lead towards increased homophily or vice versa and decrease in homophily will decrease the tie strength or vice versa. Similarly, positive and statistically significant correlation was found between tie strength and trust among

the social network users (the university students from the UK) at $r = 0.381$, and $p < 0.01$ (Table 15). So, the tie strength and trust are positively affected by each other. Moderate, statistically significant and positive correlation was also identified between the homophily and trust among the online consumers using social networks. These determinants are correlated at $r = 0.404$, $p < 0.01$ and n value of 105.

Table 15: Correlation analysis of determinants (Gender, Tie strength, homophily and trust)

		Gender	Tie strength between social networkers is an important factor that stimulates Social networkers to share product related information with their friends on the SNS	Most of the people that befriend on social networks show similar behavior, likings and disliking	Contact lists and friends on social networks trust on each other and share information regarding different products
Gender	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	1	-.077 .436	.028 .776	-.064 .517
Tie strength between social networkers is an important factor that stimulates Social networkers to share product related information with their friends on the SNS	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	-.077 .436	1	.218* .026	.381** .000

Most of the people that befriend on social networks show similar behavior, likings and disliking	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.028 .776	.218* .026	1	.404** .000
Contact lists and friends on social networks trust on each other and share information regarding different products	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	-.064 .517 105	.381** .000 105	.404** .000 105	1 105

The following table (Table 16) shows results of the correlation between different factors including gender, role played by the social networkers and interpersonal influence. The results reveal the gender had a negative and statistically significant correlation with the role played by the participants (i.e. information seekers, information passers and opinion givers). The correlation existed at $r = -0.194$, $n = 0.05$ and $p < 0.05$. The significance of this relationship is very low (0.047). Normative influence and role of the participants was positively associated and correlation existed between the two determinants at $r = 0.255$ with p value at 0.01 and $n = 105$. This correlation shows that normative influence positively impacts the purchasing decisions of the consumers because most of the consumers in our study are opinion seekers and opinion passers while very few are opinion givers. Role played had a positive significant relationship or correlation with the informative influence at $r = 0.318$ with sample size of 105 and $p = 0.01$. These results are shown in table given below (Table 16).

Table 16: Correlation analysis of some determinants (Interpersonal influence, role of consumers, informational influence)

		Gender	Consumers mostly buy those brands that are approved by their online friends and members of social networks	When you are using social networking sites, what role do you play while discussing different products and services?	Online internet users seek information from their friends about the products in order to make purchasing decisions	Do you pass interesting information and facts regarding different products that you use yourself?
Gender	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	1	.107 .275	-.194* .047	.086 .383	-.060 .546
Consumers mostly buy those brands that are approved by their online friends and members of social networks	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.107 .275	1	.255** .009	.126 .202	.049 .618
When you are using social networking	Pearson Correlation	-.194*	.255**	1	.318**	.056

sites, what role do you play while discussing different products and services?	Sig. (2-tailed)	.047	.009		.001	.570
Online internet users seek information from their friends about the products in order to make purchasing decisions	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.086	.126	.318**	1	.047
		.383	.202	.001		.637
Do you pass interesting information and facts regarding different products that you use yourself?	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	-.060	.049	.056	.047	1
		.546	.618	.570	.637	

This chapter has presented the detailed data analysis, its interpretation and results of the analysis in tabular and graphical form. The major results and findings of the study are discussed in the next chapter. The chapter will present the findings that helped in answering the research question and confirming the hypothesis made at the beginning of this study; it will also back and support the results with the literature review or explain the rational for any findings that are contradictory to the already published literature. The significance of the study and importance of the results for the marketers is also discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 5 – Results and Discussion

Results and discussion chapter is structured in order to present the major findings of the study and interpret the results from data analysis to answer the research questions. The findings illustrated in the data analysis chapter (section 3.2 and 3.3) and review of literature is collectively utilized to describe and analyze the major determinants of the UK consumer's engagement in sharing information on social media or viral marketing. This chapter represents all the major determinants identified through the analysis of primary data collected by the researchers during the course of this investigation. By using the results, the findings and their interpretation, the main research question of the study is answered in this chapter. Moreover, the results are discussed in detail for their practical implications for the social media marketers.

5.1 Results

The data analysis chapter confirmed the significance of different factors including trust among the members of the social media, homophily, interpersonal influence, informational influence and love for sharing new and interesting knowledge with the contact lists, friends and relatives at the social networks for involvement of the UK consumers in the process of word of mouse. The descriptive analysis of different questions included in the online survey based on structured interview as described in the data analysis chapter showed that the above mentioned factors did play significant role in determination of the involvement of the university students from the UK in spreading promotional information or content to their contacts in the social network. Most of the people are opinion seekers and give weight to the information or opinion given by their friends and family members as compared to the content sent to them through email by the marketers or the manufacturers. They tend to share information regarding the products they have used and provide information to their homophiles to get the same products in their collection. The correlation analysis also showed positive correlation of tie strength and homophily, normative influence and role of the consumers in social networks and role at social network with informational influence.

5.2 Analysis and Discussion

Word of mouth on social media Internet based eWOM is considered as the decisive factor as a driver of ROI (Return on Investment) (WOMMA, 2010). Therefore, business organizations see

viral marketing as an essential element of their promotional mix. This study was focused at identification and exploration of different social factors and their effect on the engagement of the UK consumers on SNSs, especially the promotional or advertisement implications of their activities on social networks. The results of the investigation indicate that different social relationship factors like trust, tie strength, normative and informative influence and frequency of contact significantly affected the social media activities of the UK consumers.

5.2.1 Engagement in Viral Marketing and Tie Strength

To answer the key research question, what are the key determinants of the UK consumer's engagement in the viral marketing, five hypotheses were developed on the basis of review of literature. First hypothesis was pertinent to the effect of tie strength (familiarity and relationship) between the social network users on their activity on social networks. The research found that tie strength among the SNSs users had positive association with the viral marketing behavior or activity of the UK consumers to share promotional content on the SNSs. Three types of role were played by the social network users including opinion givers, opinions seekers and opinions passers, the significant effect of the tie strength were observed on opinion seeking and opinion passing behavior of the participants.

Apart from the effect of tie strength on the activity of the consumers, the central question relevant to the present research was to find the link between engagements of the consumers in viral marketing and tie strength. It was revealed from the study that perceived tie strength among the UK consumers positively affected their intention to share and seek product-focused information on the social networks. It revealed that information sharing or seeking behavior depends on the level or intensity of the association among the social network users. The closeness of relationship between two members can significantly affect the consumer's decision to seek information from others or share information to each other. These findings confirmed the hypothesis regarding perceived tie strength as a determinant of involvement of the UK consumers in viral marketing.

The results revealed consumer's intentions to share information or their product experiences with all their contacts (weak ties) instead of only sharing it with their closest friends and relations (strong ties); it can be reasoned with the facilities provided by the Web 2.0 technology that

enable them to provide and transfer information in the most convenient and rapid way, without even carefully thinking about the information. Tie strength was also reported as a major factor that affected the exchange of information by the online social networkers by Chu and Kim (2011). Results showed that frequency of using social networks and sharing information had positive relationship with tie strength. The correlation analysis showed strong ties led towards higher frequency of contact and vice versa. The respondents considered that friend's lists were essential to exchange product or service experiences and promotional content with online friends.

5.2.2 Homophily

The current study found a positive association between perceived homophily and information seeking and opinion passing activity of the consumers on SNSs. These results are same as found by Rogers and Bhowmik (1970) who reported enhanced information sharing behavior among homophiles but the results contradict with the findings reported by Chu and Kim (2011) who reported negative association between information sharing behavior and homophily among the members of SNSs. The tendency of the consumers to befriend their homophiles and higher frequency of contact and communication with friends list reinforce the results regarding homophily. The argument that similar behavior, likings and psychographic attributes do not affect eWOM positively can be ignored because most of the friends on the social networking sites have similar ideas, behavior and attitude towards different products and promotional contents.

However, homophily can restrict the social circle of SNS members and prevent them from reaching diverse knowledge, experiences and information through viral marketing. Although homophily limits the social circle of an individual yet it has greater influence on information seeking, attitude development and interpersonal communications (McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 2001).

The study concluded that homophily has significant and positive association with consumer behavior on SNSs and positively affects their activity of sharing product based messages or information with others (i.e. their homophiles). According to Cakim (2010), homophilic people have the intentions to possess the same things as their homophiles and if one of them exchanges

the information of a product or service that he purchased or used, the other homophiles do not hesitate to purchase the same product.

5.2.3 Trust

Another social relationship construct that was examined by this research was the trust among the members of SNSs and its impact on their online activity at SNSs. It was also identified as an influential determinant that engaged the consumers in all sorts of online activities as far as promotion of the products or services is concerned. According to the findings of this study, higher trust among the SNS users enhanced the likelihood of their engagement in opinion seeking, passing and giving behavior. These results show agreement with those reported by Jarvenpaa et al. (1998) as well as Ridings et al. (2002). Both studies reported positive relationship between perceived trust and intentions of the SNS users to exchange information. Thus, hypothesis about the significant impact of trust on consumer's engagement on SNSs was verified through these results.

Trust can be considered as a tool for the evaluation of the source as well as the value of information shared on social networks. The online consumers use this tool for evaluation of the product related news, promotional content or information. Therefore, trust has significant impact on viral marketing through SNSs. Once the online consumers develop trust on their social contacts, included in their friend's list, their engagement in viral marketing is increased due to the perceived trust and reliability of the information shared by these contacts.

Similar results regarding the trust were reported by Baines, Fill and Page (2008) who confirmed that trust among the members of a network motivates them to seek opinion, ask for advice or get product related information from other trustworthy members when they have to purchase a product.

From correlation analysis, it was found that two social factors including frequency of communication between the members of social networks and their homophily influenced their online activity. Both these factors have positive correlation with trust. This finding is supported by the results reported by Cravens (2006) who revealed that trust of one person on the other person motivates him or her to seek the other's opinion in shopping as well as other matters. This opinion is given importance and heavily influences the purchase related decisions.

Trust and high dependence on the opinion of trusted ones significantly increases the rate of information sharing on SNSs because homophily and trust are positively correlated. The opinion seekers like to share the product related experiences with other homophiles who in turn are influenced by this information due to trust or homophily.

5.2.4 Interpersonal Influence and Love of Sharing Knowledge

The hypothesis regarding the significant impact of interpersonal influence on the UK consumer's activity in SNSs also yield affirmative results. The analysis of data yielded positive association between interpersonal influence on the SNS users and their engagement in eWOM on social networking sites. The previous studies have also reported the same association. The SNS users who are prone to normative influence emphasize on relationship building with contacts and path of information exchange. Due to connectivity through virtual world, the SNS users develop strong psychological association with their friends and members in contact list; this association influences the purchase or acquisition of products, brands or services. The transmission of information results in the development of social relationship between users of the SNSs and augmented engagement in viral marketing. The consumers under normative influence tend to gather information and opinion about products from their contacts, especially those who are knowledgeable about products. This behavior in turn encourages the opinion givers and their engagement in spreading electronic word of mouth.

Social relationships exert some normative influence on the persons involved in these relations as described by Dholakia and Durham (2010). Internet users visit review sites, blogs and discussions when they require a product related information. Moreover, the online consumers trust the information that is posted by some third party as compared to the promotional content posted by marketers, distributors or manufacturers. From these findings and support from the literature review, it was confirmed that interpersonal influence significantly affected the activity of SNSs users. They not only seek the information from trustworthy sources, contacts and friends but they also disseminate the promotional content as reliable information to their homophiles and participate in the eWOM.

When correlation analysis was conducted, the interpersonal informational influence did not show significant association with opinion-giving behavior on SNSs. It can be justified because the

results also suggest that opinion giving role is played by very few online UK consumers. It may also suggest that information influence is more related to opinion seeking instead of opinion giving (Bearden et al. 1989). Laroche et al. (2005) also suggested that social network users who are susceptible to informational influence are more concerned with the value of information exchanged. It was concluded that the UK consumers who were engaged in viral marketing and were susceptible to informational interpersonal influence were less likely to exchange information with others once they sought it from their contacts.

5.3 Theoretical and Managerial Implications

The findings given above lead towards following theoretical implications; contribution of the research towards existing literature on viral marketing is also given in the following lines. Firstly, the results obtained from this investigation enrich our knowledge and understanding of the product related viral marketing and behavior of the online consumers through detailed description of the phenomenon and its prospective significance as rapidly emerging advertising medium. Secondly, the research empirically explored some social relationship constructs as determinants of eWOM or viral marketing behavior on SNSs. The study highlights considerable difference in viral marketing and eWOM through other online platforms including blogs, reviews, discussion groups and emails. It revealed that product based eWOM through SNSs or viral marketing is a distinct process and has its own social as well as advertising implications for the business organizations. The study involves theoretical research (literature review) and empirical investigation (survey and collection of primary data) to identify major social relationship factors affecting this phenomenon. The study has explored the role and importance of the social relationship constructs including trust, tie strengths, homophily and interpersonal influence in engaging the online consumers in viral marketing.

Another major finding regarding the significance of normative influence was the high percentage of opinion seekers and opinion passers as compared to the opinion givers. It implies that most of the UK consumers using SNSs look for others opinion regarding the products or services in the market. This is the reiteration of the findings of Chu and Kim (2011). They also found that majority of the online consumers sought the opinion of others who had normative influence for purchasing a product. The love of social networkers to share information with their friends in order become known for their diverse knowledge.

The results and findings of the study also yield some managerial insight for the marketers and advertising agencies on the social media. Firstly, the results confirm the argument of Mangold and Faulds (2009) who reported the hybrid role of social media in integrated marketing communication (IMC). The SNSs enable the business organizations to emphasize and pursue single and unified consumer centered approach (i.e. only single promotional message for all the target consumers) to communicate with their potential customers.

It is different from traditional marketing in a sense that it enabled the consumers and potential customers to participate in the advertisement through eWOM by controlling the communication of promotional messages from one to other consumers using social media i.e. SNSs. Moreover, it was also revealed that SNSs serve as an essential and active channel for the business organizations to develop strong consumer – brand relationship. Marketing managers should focus the social relationship factors as influencers of the viral marketing and encourage online social network members to spread positive eWOM regarding their brand, products and services. Identification of the social constructs will also help the organizations to discourage negative comments and information.

Third most distinguishing feature of the viral marketing and managerial application of the research is that SNSs are interactive medium and that allows the marketers and firms to access targeted, voluntary and segmented audience in the most economical way as compared to the traditional media. The findings of the research emphasize the importance of social factors as determinants of involvement of the consumers in this process. Therefore, marketers should consider and give importance to social relationship constructs while developing marketing strategies as well as personalized communication (marketing) strategies in order to meet the needs of the SNSs users. For instance, the users trust, tie strengths and homophily should be considered.

According to the results of the study, if the target customers are online social media users and they are susceptible to interpersonal influence (either normative or informative), viral marketing is the most suitable technique for online marketing because these users are more prone to social influences and will end up purchasing the products referred by their friends or links.

The results discussed above also provide significant implications for the strategy makers as it provides insight into the social factors that regulate behavior of the consumers on the social media. For instance, the policy makers and management can focus their policies on the social network users whose behavior on the SNSs is affected by their trust on the social contacts and encourage them to engage in viral marketing. By acquiring the understanding of the way online consumers give their profile information and access to their social connections without compromising their privacy, effective regulations and strategies can be developed to encourage a long term association between the consumers and particular brands.

5.4 Limitations

Despite using the most suitable research process, data collection and analysis methods and conducting in depth analysis of the available literature, the study also involves some limitations. Although university students from the UK are the representatives of the most social media users in the country yet they might not have provided and reflected the perspective of all UK consumers who use SNSs. The literature review pointed out that the use of SNSs is rapidly increasing among older demographics and they are the major contributor towards rapid growth of social media across many countries of the world, further investigations can be carried out in order to find difference of behavior on SNSs across generations. Secondly, the current study has only explored some of the social relationship factors for their influence on the engagement of consumers in transfer of information due to social nature of the SNSs. However, there might be several other factors including individual differences among the users of SNSs, constraint and motivational variables etc that can affect the engagement of consumers in eWOM through SNSs.

From the finding of the current research, the study has evidently answered the research question. The social factors including tie strength, trust, normative and informative interpersonal influence, homophily and love to share information were identified as the major determinants of the UK consumer's product related activity on SNSs. The study also determined correlation between some of the above listed social factors. The practical and theoretical implications of these results are also discussed along with the major limitations that might have been involved in the current study. All the results regarding the determinants have been supported and compared with the previous findings by different researchers.

The next chapter entails the conclusion of the thesis by summarizing the results and reflection on the research process by the researchers. The chapter also provides future prospects of the research on the viral marketing and other factors that may impact the activity of the consumers on SNSs.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

The results and discussion chapter has presented the main findings and discussed their implications (both theoretical and practical). The findings emphasized that familiarity and social relationship factors among the UK consumers who used social networks were positively correlated to their online activity related to the viral marketing. The empirical data confirmed the familiarity or tie strength as important factor that motivated the activity of information exchange in the online users.

The university students who took part in the survey reported that they often involved promotional messages or product related information to their relations, family and contacts. They have social networks on SNSs like Facebook and Twitter; the affinity towards their contact lists stimulates them to exchange their own and their friend's experiences with others. Empirical evidence was provided to affirm the tie strength as one of the major determinants of engaging consumers in word of mouse.

The frequency of contact among the social networkers rate of visiting the network by the participants contributed towards developing trustworthy relationship among the members of a network. Empirical data proved that trust motivated the university students to seek for opinion of their trustworthy contacts (weak ties) and close friends (strong ties) when they wanted to purchase a product, the quality of a particular brand and other necessary details. Those, who have experience of using a product, knowledge about the quality and utility of a brand or have heard about its performance; feel happily giving their opinion to the opinion seekers and act as opinion givers in this phenomenon; thus marketing activity is enhanced as it is controlled by the consumers. This construct was also empirically verified as the key determinant that enhanced the activity of the UK consumers present on SNSs. Moreover, the effectiveness of word of mouse is increased when trust comes into play along with the exchange of information. The familiarity of the person and trust on the shared information combine to significantly affect the decisions of a person to purchase certain products.

Literature review helped in the identification of interpersonal influence as a factor that might have some effect on the online activity of the consumers involved in social networking. The data

collected in response to this variable was statistically analyzed and it was empirically proved that increased interpersonal influence, especially normative influence, also increased the activity of the consumers on SNSs in sharing and exchanging the information. The need for opinion and love of sharing the knowledge or experience further enhanced the activity of the consumers in SNSs. Opinion seeking was identified as the most frequent activity of the participants. Opinion passing was the second largest activity while a small fraction was acting as opinion givers.

The study also identified and confirmed receptivity of the consumers towards exchange of information and their love to seek other's opinion about certain products and know about the utility of the services. This receptivity and love for having and sharing product related news or information also positively affected the engagement of the UK consumers and increased receptiveness led towards increased activity on the SNSs. Perceived homophily was found to be positively associated with engagement on SNSs i.e. increased homophily will increase the activities like information sharing, opinion seeking, opinion passing and opinion giving on the social networks while low homophily may reduce these activities. To sum up, it was empirically proved that homophily, normative influence, trust, tie strength or familiarity, perceived love for sharing and collecting useful information are the major determinants responsible for engaging the online users on SNSs in viral marketing.

6.1 Future Research

The study has vast future prospects because viral marketing is relatively a new marketing trend. This research has only emphasized the influence of social factors on the engagement of the internet users in SNSs while many other factors like motivational and constraint factors, individual differences of the SNSs users, other social factors (e.g. self-disclosure, self-presentation) and psychographic factors were ignored. Future research may take the above-mentioned variables into account and evaluate their impact on the consumer's involvement in viral marketing. On the other hand, the same variables can be utilized and analyzed for a different group of people or different sample size in order to confirm the results of the current investigation or analyze the impact of these variables for culturally different consumers. There are vast prospects to elaborate this phenomenon with different segments of the target consumers.

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Appendices

Questionnaire on Viral Marketing

We are carrying out an investigation regarding the impact of the key determinants for engagement of the UK consumers in viral marketing from the perspective of university students. **This questionnaire is only a part of our MBA degree for thesis purpose.** It is requested that you spare some time to read and fill up this questionnaire comprehensively. The demographic information will be used for the research purpose and all responses will be treated as anonymous.

Thanks a lot for your help

Note: Please highlight the appropriate answer.

Q. 1: Kindly specify your gender.

- 1) Male
- 2) Female

Q. 2: Please specify your age.

- 1) Below 20
- 2) 21 – 25
- 3) 26 – 30
- 4) Above 30

Q. 3: What is the frequency of your contact with your social network on SNSs?

- 1) Most Frequent
- 2) Frequent
- 3) Rare
- 4) Never

Q. 4: Which is the Most used Social Network by you?

- 1) Facebook
- 2) Twitter
- 3) Orkut
- 4) LinkedIn
- 5) Ibibio

Q.5: Friends list are very important for the social networkers on SNSs?

- 1) Strongly Agree
- 2) Agree
- 3) Disagree
- 4) Strongly disagree

Q. 6: Tie strength between social networkers is an important factor that stimulates Social networkers to share product related information with their friends on the SNS?

- 1) Strongly Agree
- 2) Agree
- 3) Disagree
- 4) Strongly disagree

Q. 7: Most of the people that befriend on social networks show similar behavior, likings and disliking?

- 1) Strongly Agree
- 2) Agree
- 3) Disagree

4) Strongly disagree

Q. 8: Contact lists and friends on social networks trust on each other and share information regarding different products?

1) Strongly Agree

2) Agree

3) Disagree

4) Strongly disagree

Q.9: Consumers mostly buy those brands that are approved by their online friends and members of social networks?

1) Strongly Agree

2) Agree

3) Disagree

4) Strongly disagree

Q. 10: When you are using social networking sites, what role do you play while discussing different products and services?

1) Opinion seeker

2) Opinion giver

3) Opinion passer

Q. 11: Online internet users seek information from their friends about the products in order to make purchasing decisions?

1) Strongly Agree

2) Agree

3) Disagree

4) Strongly disagree

Q. 12: Do you pass interesting information and facts regarding different products that you use yourself?

1) Yes

2) No