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## PURSUING PURCHASE INTENTION FROM ONLINE CUSTOMER: THE ROLE OF VIRAL MARKETING AND REFERENCE GROUP

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**ABSTRACT** In this digital era, researchers began to discuss a lot of online-based marketing variables. Among the variables that are widely analyzed by several literatures and also practiced by businessman in their marketing strategies are the viral marketing and reference groups. This study aims to analyze the relationship between viral marketing and reference groups on brand awareness and viral marketing. This research uses quantitative methods and analyzes 235 respondents from online course users in Surabaya. The data in this study are primary data obtained through questionnaire distribution and analyzed using the Structural Equation Model method with AMOS software. The results of this study indicate that viral marketing and reference groups are the right strategy in marketing today. The results of the analysis prove that viral marketing and reference groups can provide a positive and significant impact on brand awareness and purchase intention.

### INTRODUCTION

Marketing is always recognized as one of the main keys to the success of a business. Because it is recognized and realized by business people, the competition in marketing is certainly getting tougher. Especially in the digital era like today, distance is no longer a limitation in selling products, marketing offices are no longer important because all aspects of marketing can be done online.

Discussions related to marketing strategies are always associated with digital technology. Digital technology, especially social media, is able to facilitate the marketing of products or services that are not limited by distance and time. So that comes a term that is discussed by some researchers lately related to marketing in the online world that is able to introduce a product or service brand and bring lots of customers from various parts of the country on a massive scale, namely viral marketing.

The use of viral marketing is always integrated with social networking sites like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook etc. through viral marketing, sellers are able to increase brand awareness of consumers both old and new consumers [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8] and led to purchase intentions [5], [6], [9], [10], [11], [12], [8] so that the company's performance will increase rapidly.

Convincing consumers so that the brand and purchase intention increases is certainly not easy. In addition to viral marketing, something else is needed that also convinces consumers about the superiority of the products and services offered, recommendations from a group of trusted people are very important, so reference groups are one of the best solutions in increasing brand and purchase intention.

Reference Group is a group that is considered as the basis of comparison or reference for an individual in forming values and attitudes to behave [13]. Individual behavior can be exposed by reference groups to new behaviors and manifestations, and influence attitudes and self-concepts, they create pressures for conformity that may affect actual product and brand choices [14].

Researchers generally agree that reference groups are able to influence consumers to make purchases of a product and service. Consumers use the reference group as a purchase reference, they often ask family, friends or see from someone they are idolized from both celebrity and influencers. It is therefore not surprising that several previous studies have focused their studies on the impact of reference groups on brands [15], [16], [17] and purchase intentions [17], [18], [19], [20], [21], [22].

## 1 LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS

### 2.1. VIRAL MARKETING

Viral marketing is marketing techniques that use social networks to produce increases in brand awareness through self-replicating viral diffusion of messages, analogous to the spread of pathological and computer viruses [23]. Mohr [24] defines viral marketing as a marketing technique that uses the Internet, social networking, and technologies to encourage people to engage in word of mouth, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and influence.

Another definition states that the definition of viral marketing is a communication and distribution concept that relies on customers to transmit digital products via electronic mail to other potential customers in their social sphere and animate these contacts to also transmit the product [25]. Viral marketing can be built through 4 development instruments namely e-mail format, social media networks, interesting and useful subjects and entertaining content [5].

Viral marketing is the most effective strategy in marketing products or services in this era. Viral marketing can increase brand awareness with several supporting factors, namely social media, messages, attractiveness, spread, credibility, entertainment and influencers [2]. Whereas Sawaftah et al. [6] states that viral marketing has 2 attributes, namely viral advertising and E-WOM (Electronic Word of Mouth). Both attributes are analyzed and proven to be able to increase brand image and purchase intention.

Besides the greatness of viral marketing in attracting the attention of consumers, viral marketing also has a disadvantage that sometimes the effects of viral marketing are only temporary. To cover these weaknesses, Bhattacharya et al. [3] proposed 2 aspects that must be considered by advertisers so that consumers remain consistent in buying the products and services offered, namely clear privacy policies about protecting consumer data, and adding social context to encourage spontaneous reminders among consumers .

Liu and Wang [5] give attention to the emergence of the internet which has presented several challenges and opportunities for marketers. Marketers have found more innovative methods to communicate effectively with their target markets, and viral marketing is one of these methods. Liu and Wang [5] try to explore the mutual relationship between viral marketing and purchase intentions through customer-based brand equity. Viral marketing consists of interesting, useful and informative subjects, message interaction, message reception, and offensive content, each of which has different effects on brand equity and customer purchase intentions.

In addition, interaction with viral marketing is very important and positively influence either brand equity or purchase intentions. Furthermore, by including brand equity as a mediator, the negative effects of receiving messages on consumer purchase intentions can be changed to positive effects. Brand equity itself is built through 4 instruments namely customer awareness of the brand, quality, value and customer loyalty. So it can be concluded that growth through customers can be realized by developing viral marketing and brand equity.

## 2.2. REFERENCE GROUP

According to Olson & Peter [26], a reference group is defined as one or more people that someone uses as a basis for comparison or points of reference in forming affective and cognitive responses and performing behaviors. Reference groups are usually conformed by the social network of an individual: family members, friends and colleagues, and inspirational figures [27] and can be a source of brand associations that mold the mental representations of a consumer has of himself [28].

There are many similar definitions of reference groups, all of which hold that reference groups have a large reference value for individuals. Today, reference groups are simply defined as a group which individual references during the process of decision making, judgment, cognition, and behavior [13].

Kotler and Keller [29] divide social factors into 3 sub factors, namely reference groups, family and social status. This study chose to propose a reference group as a factor affecting Brand and purchase intention and the results show that the relationship is proven to be empirically significant.

Alamro and Rowley [15] emphasize that reference groups are part of the antecedent customer attribute consisting of satisfaction, perceived risk and the reference group itself. Reference Group which is part of the customer attribute antecedent has been shown to have a positive relationship with brand preference. Brand preference is a feature that is used in all types of brand strategy. Brand preference consists of 3 aspects that shape it, namely brand awareness, brand image and customer attributes.

Bian and Forsythe [17] discuss about how consumers are interested in purchasing goods that have luxury brands. Consumer interest in luxury brands was triggered by individual characters consisting of need for uniqueness, self-monitoring, self-expression attitude, self-presentation attitude and affective attitude. However, from the external scope it was also found that consumer interest in luxury brands was influenced by reference groups.

Reference groups can also be described with several dimensions of subjective norm, namely children's influence, spouse's influence, elderly parents' influence and friend's influence [19]. From these four aspects Sangkakoon et al. [19] found that children's influence had the greatest influence on household purchases followed by spouse's influence. The elderly parent's influence and friend's influence have less influence on household purchases. The measurement of a broader reference group is described by Satyanegara and Widi-kusyanto [21] who use 4 indicators including family, friendship, school and social media.

Hoonsopon and Puriwat [18] also analyzed the relationship between reference groups and purchase intentions. Reference groups have an effect on purchase decisions according to the type of consumer. For utilitarian shopper, private groups have more influence on purchase intention than public groups. As for hedonic shoppers, public groups exert a greater influence than private groups in purchase decisions.

Reference groups are also an important component in increasing purchase intentions for online customers. Khandelwal et al. [20] states that in online purchases, reference groups have an important role because every non-conventional style of purchasing is highly dispersed through the reference group dispersion. Khandelwal et al. [20] divides reference groups into 2 types, namely comparative and normative.

On the other hand, Pransopon and Hoonsopon [22] divide reference groups into 3 types, namely private public and stranger, which have a significant relationship to purchase intention. Sheu et al. [16] put reference groups as the external impact of consumer behavior that will provide informational influences, normative influences and identification influences. Whereas Hauret and Williams [30] found that reference groups influence wellbeing which includes life satisfaction, job satisfaction and satisfaction with pay.

### **2.3. BRAND AWARENESS**

Market share is an area contested by business people to have a competitive advantage and be able to continuously improve their business performance. In gaining market share, the brand is an important instrument that must be developed by the company. Brand is defined as a 'name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, that is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors' [31].

One of the targets desired by business people in developing their brand is to increase brand awareness from consumers. Brand awareness is specified as the consumer's capacities to identify and recall the brand in various situations, and it also plays the important role in the consumer's purchase decision [32]. According to Sasmita and Suki [33], organizations with high brand awareness gain more competitive advantages and enjoy the opportunities for successful extensions, resilience against competitors' promotional pressures and creation of barriers to competitive entry.

Other researchers define brand awareness as the extent to which customers are familiar with the functions, values, qualities, uniqueness, taste and image of a particular brand of goods or services [34], [35]. Product quality, customer satisfaction and customer perceived value of the brand play an essential role in the awareness of the advertised product brand [34], [35].

Researchers prove that brand awareness can increase purchase intention [36], [37], [38], [39], [40], [41], [42], [5], [43]. Dabbous and Barakat [37] analyzed the related brand awareness and its relationship with purchase intention and found a significant relationship between consumers both online and offline. Likewise with Graciola et al. [39] who found that Brand Awareness can significantly increase purchase intention with the support of image and perceived value. Brand awareness can also be categorized as a component of brand equity and has been proven to have an effect on purchase intention [5].

In some cases, brand awareness may not be able to have a significant influence on purchase intentions but will be significant if moderated by other variables such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) [36]. Supporting the relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention can be found from several variables such as image and perceived price [39], credibility and expertise of

vloggers in social media [40] and product packaging, attractiveness of advertising, distribution intensity [41].

## 2.4. PURCHASE INTENTION

The first step of a marketer to market a product or service sold is to grow consumer interest. Consumer interest in a product or service is the result of the consideration of several brands that they know and when the interest of a brand exceeds other brands, there arises the desire to buy or often referred to as purchase intention.

Purchase intention is the combination of consumers' interest in a brand or a product and the likelihood of purchasing these items. It is strongly related to the attitude and preference toward a particular brand or a product [37]. So it can be understood that purchase intention is one indicator of good perception from consumers of a product or service.

Purchase intention is the most powerful predictor in measuring purchase behavior, measurement of purchase intention can be seen from customer satisfaction and loyalty (Liu and Wang, 2020). So it can be concluded that the purchase intention of a product or service can be seen from the willingness and actions of consumers to buy products and services that they have already purchased ([39]).

Previous literature reveals many factors that can increase purchase intention on a product or service. But what's even more interesting is how in this digital era purchase intention can be increased through the digital world especially social media, among these factors are reference groups [17], [18], [19], [20], [21], [22]) and viral marketing [5], [6], [9], [10], [11], [12], [8].

The relationship between reference groups and purchase intentions has differences between several types of consumers. For utilitarian shopper, private groups have more influence on purchase intention than public groups. As for hedonic shoppers, public groups exert more influence than private groups in purchase decisions [18].

Regarding viral marketing, Sawaftah et al. [6] states that viral marketing has 2 attributes namely viral advertising and E-WOM (Electronic Word of Mouth). Both attributes are analyzed and proven to be able to increase brand image and purchase intention.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a quantitative study with online course consumer population in Surabaya. The sample of this study was 235 consumers from 4 online courses in Surabaya namely ruangguru.com, gurulesku.id, wirahadie.com and A + Bimbel. Data from this study were obtained through the distribution of questionnaires which were then analyzed using the Structural Equation Model (SEM) method with AMOS 23 software. The measurement variables in this study used the following instruments:

Viral marketing measurements in this study refer to studies by Liu and Wang [5] including:

1. I will choose viral marketing as information about the product or service
2. I believe in viral marketing
3. I will consider buying a product or service that is viral even if it is expensive
4. I will recommend to others about products or services that are viral
5. I am satisfied with the content received from viral advertisements

Reference group measurements in this study refer to research by Satyanegara and Widikusyanto [21] including:

1. Family recommendations are one of my references to buying products or services
2. A friend's recommendation is one of my references to buying a product or service
3. The recommendation of a colleague or teacher at school is one of my references to buying a product or service
4. Influencer recommendations on social media are one of my references to buying products or services

Measurement of brand awareness in this study refers to Graciola et al. [39] with the following measurements:

1. I always remember the logo and brand online course when looking for courses.
2. I am very acquainted or accustomed to the brand of this online course.
3. This online course brand is different from other competing brands.

Measurement of Purchase Intention in this study refers to [39] with measurements as follows:

1. I will continue to study in this online course
2. I will not go to other courses.
3. I will recommend this online course to my friends and family.
4. I intend to learn in this online course in the near future.

## RESULT

### 4.1. RESPONDENTS CHARACTERISTICS

Respondents in this study were online course participants in 4 institutions namely ruangguru.com, gurulesku.id, wirahadie.com and A + Bimbel. Of the 235 samples taken 57.8% were female while 42.2% were men. So it can be concluded that most respondents from this study were female.

Based on age grouping, 72.3% of respondents had an age of 12-20 years while 27.7% aged 21-30 years. So that the majority of respondents in this study had the age of 12-20 years. The grouping of respondents by education level, 24.3% are Junior High School students, 48% are senior high school students and 27.7% are students. So that the majority of respondents in this study were senior high school students.

### 4.2. VALIDITY TEST

Validity shows that the questions on the questionnaire are able to reveal something that is measured by the questionnaire. Measuring validity is done by looking at the value of loading factor. According to Hair et al. [44] the minimum number of factor loading is  $\geq 0.5$  or ideally  $\geq 0.7$  then it can be said to be valid. The loading factor values in this study are as in Table 1.

Tabel 1. Loading Factors

			Estimate
VM5	<---	VM	0,759
VM4	<---	VM	0,664
VM3	<---	VM	0,676
VM2	<---	VM	0,795

			Estimate
VM1	<---	VM	0,796
RG4	<---	RG	0,624
RG3	<---	RG	0,550
RG2	<---	RG	0,602
RG1	<---	RG	0,780
PI1	<---	PI	0,605
PI2	<---	PI	0,649
PI3	<---	PI	0,608
PI4	<---	PI	0,666
BA3	<---	BA	0,933
BA2	<---	BA	0,927
BA1	<---	BA	0,975

From table 1 it is known that all indicators in this study already have a loading factor value of more than 0.5 so that it can be concluded that all indicators in this study can be said to be valid.

#### 4.3. RELIABILITY TEST

The reliability test is used to measure whether the construct in this study is reliable or not. Good reliability is if the construct reliability value > 0.7 and the extracted variance value > 0.5. From the calculation results, the Reliability Test results are obtained in Table 2.

Table 2. Reliability Test

Variable	Construct Reliability	Variance Extracted
Viral Marketing	0,9	0,5
Reference Group	0,7	0,5
Brand Awareness	1,0	0,9
Purchase Intention	0,7	0,5

From Table 2 it can be seen that the construct reliability of all variables already shows  $\geq 0.7$ . As for the variance extracted in this study, each variable also has a value of  $\geq 0.5$ . So it can be concluded that the questionnaire used for this study was declared reliable.

#### 4.4. GOODNESS OF FIT

Conformity model conformity test is tested using the Goodness of Fit Index. Hair et al. [45], [46], [47] divides GOFI (Goodness of Fit Index) criteria into 3 types of criteria, namely absolute fit indices, incremental fit indices and parsimony fit indices. In this study several criteria were taken from each type of GOFI namely CMINDF and RMSEA representing absolute fit indices, CFI and TLI representing incremental fit indices then PGFI and PNFI represented parsimony fit indices. The results of the confirmatory analysis can be seen in table 3.

Table 3. Goodness of Fit

Fit Indeks	Goodness of Fit	Kriteria	Cut-off value	Keterangan
Absolute Fit	RMSEA	$\leq 0.08$	0.065	Fit
	CMINDF	$\leq 2,00$	1.998	Fit

Incremental Fit	TLI	$\geq 0.90$	0.948	Fit
	CFI	$\geq 0.90$	0.964	Fit
Parsimony Fit	PGFI	$\geq 0.60$	0.569	Fit
	PNFI	$\geq 0.60$	0.652	Fit

From table 3 it is known that all the criteria for goodness of fit have been met so that the model in this study can be said to meet the standards of goodness of fit.

#### 4.5. HYPOTHESIS TEST

The next analysis is the Structural Equation Model (SEM) analysis in full model to test the hypotheses developed in this study. The regression weight test results in this study are as shown in Figure 1 and table 4.

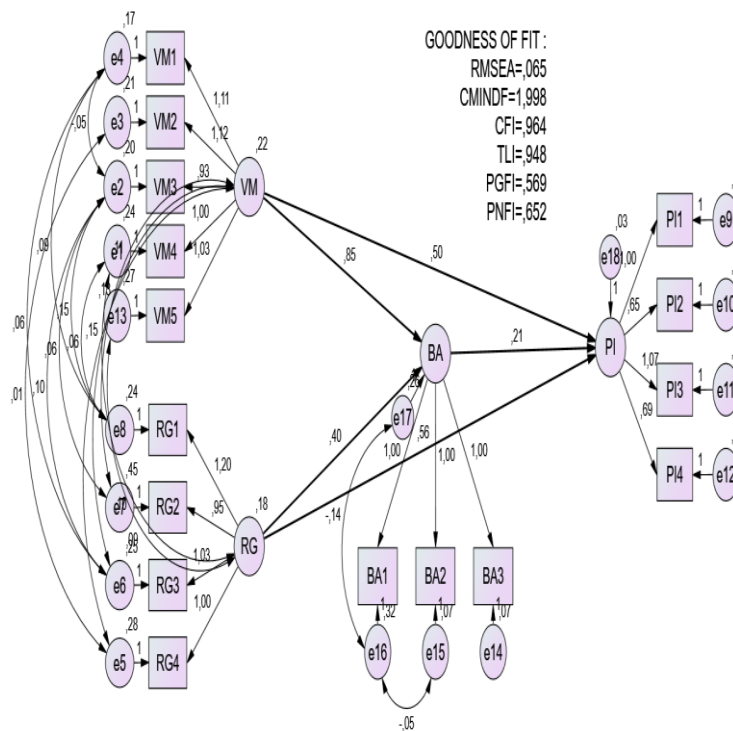


Figure 1. Path Analysis

Table 4. Regression Weight

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
BA	<--	VM	,850	,098	8,673	***
BA	<--	RG	,400	,081	4,955	***
PI	<--	VM	,497	,092	5,422	***
PI	<--	RG	,558	,088	6,305	***
PI	<--	BA	,208	,059	3,542	***

To identify the hypothesis accepted or rejected, that is by looking at the value of the Critical Ratio (CR) and the probability value (P) from the results of data processing. If the test results show a CR value above 1.96 and a probability



value (P) below 0.05 / 5%, the proposed research hypothesis is accepted. In this study, 5 hypotheses are proposed, the discussion of which will be elaborated as follows:

H1: Viral Marketing (VM) has a positive and significant effect on Brand Awareness (BA)

Based on data processing, it is known that the CR value is 8,673 and the P value is 0,000. These results indicate that the CR value is above 1.96 and the P value is below 0.05. Therefore it can be concluded that Viral Marketing (VM) has positive and significant effect on Brand Awareness (BA). So H1 in this study is supported.

H2: Reference Group (RG) has a positive and significant effect on Brand Awareness (BA)

Based on data processing, it is known that the CR value is 4.955 and the P value is 0.000. These results indicate that the CR value is above 1.96 and the P value is below 0.05. Therefore it can be concluded that the Reference Group (RG) has a positive and significant effect on Brand Awareness (BA). So H2 in this research is supported.

H3: Viral Marketing (VM) has a positive and significant effect on Purchase Intention (PI)

Based on data processing, it is known that the CR value is 5.422 and the P value is 0.000. These results indicate that the CR value is above 1.96 and the P value is below 0.05. Therefore it can be concluded that Viral Marketing (VM) has a positive and significant effect on Purchase Intention (PI). So that H3 in this study is supported.

H4: Reference Group (RG) has a positive and significant effect on Purchase Intention (PI)

Based on data processing, it is known that the CR value is 6.305 and the P value is 0.000. These results indicate that the CR value is above 1.96 and the P value is below 0.05. Therefore it can be concluded that the Reference Group (RG) has a positive and significant effect on Purchase Intention (PI). So that H4 in this research is supported.

H5: Brand Awareness (BA) has a positive and significant effect on Purchase Intention (PI)

Based on data processing, it is known that the CR value is 3.542 and the P value is 0.000. These results indicate that the CR value is above 1.96 and the P value is below 0.05. Therefore it can be concluded that Brand Awareness (BA) has a positive and significant effect on Purchase Intention (PI). So that H5 in this research is supported.

## **DISCUSSION**

Online-based business activities have become a new habit for people in almost all parts of the world. Many variables that are believed by business practitioners and researchers are able to improve marketing performance in this digital age, including viral marketing and reference groups. This study discusses the influence of viral marketing and reference groups in increasing brand awareness and purchase intention.

Viral marketing and reference groups are a form of marketing strategy that is quite telling. When a product or service can be viral in the middle of the community it will be widely known, but some people certainly do not easily believe only with viral information, so they need a reference group to be more convincing and ultimately lead to purchase intention.

This research results that viral marketing and reference group can influence positively and significantly on brand awareness and purchase intention. Statistical analysis in this study supports H1 with an estimated value of 0.850. These results indicate that viral marketing can provide a positive influence of 85% on brand awareness.

This study also supports H3 with an estimated value of 0.497 so that it can be seen that viral marketing is also able to provide a positive effect of 49.7% on purchase intention. Therefore it can be concluded that viral marketing can have a greater influence on brand awareness than purchase intention.

In line with Liu and Wang [5] this study results that consumers respond well to viral marketing, the good response is shown through consumer preferences for viral marketing to explore information related to the desired product, consumer confidence, the need for viral products, recommendations and satisfaction for viral products.

Good responses from consumers to viral products and services have a significant influence on brand awareness that supports findings from research by [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [48], [49], [50] and towards purchase intention which also supports research by Liu and Wang [5], [6], [9], [10], [11], [12], [8], [51], [52], [53].

This study also found that the reference group was able to have a significant influence on brand awareness that supported several previous studies by Alamro and Rowley [15], [16], [17] and purchase intention in line with research by Bian and Forsythe [17], [18], [19], [20], [21], [22], [54], [55].

Statistical analysis in this study supports H2 with an estimated value of 0.400. These results indicate that the reference group is able to have a positive influence of 40% on brand awareness. The H4 in this study is also supported by an estimated value of 0.558, which means the reference group has a positive influence on purchase intention of 55.8%. From these results it can be concluded that the reference group has a greater influence on purchase intention than brand awareness.

There are 4 groups that have been shown to be able to exert significant influence, namely family, friends, teachers and influencers. These four groups have the potential to be good marketing targets. These findings are in line with Satyanegara and Widikusyanto [21] who also focused the reference group analysis of the 4 groups and found significant results.

The results of statistical analysis in this study also support H5 with an estimated value of 0.208 which means brand awareness is able to have a positive and significant effect on purchase intention with a magnitude of influence of 20.8%. These results are in line with previous research by Hoang et al. [36], [37], [38], [39], [40], [41], [42], [5], [43].

## CONCLUSION AND MANAJERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study generally supports the hypotheses that were compiled by the researchers and concludes that viral marketing and reference groups are able to have a positive and significant influence on brand awareness and purchase intention. These results indicate that at present, especially in online-based businesses as well as a combination of online and offline viral marketing and reference groups are important strategies in marketing. By increasing viral marketing and reference groups on the products and services offered, it can increase brand awareness and purchase intention.

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