

**VIRAL MARKETING:  
FROM ADVERTISING EFFECTIVENESS TO ETHICAL RISKS**

*Abdelmalik MEZHOUDA*  
*Ecole nationale supérieure de Management (ENSM) - Kolea*  
*Campus – Tipaza*  
[a.mezhouda@ensm.dz](mailto:a.mezhouda@ensm.dz)  
*Fax: 024 38 00 08*

**Abstract**

Despite its youth age as an innovative e-marketing technic, Viral Marketing generated a lot of excitement, and buzz on the web by, on one hand, achieving extraordinary results ever achieved before in the advertising field and creating a lot of excitement with respect to ethical issues as many viral campaigns have shocked the community with their intentionally well-conceived unethical contents. Based on many cases of controverted viral marketing campaigns, the present article tries to highlight Viral Marketing ethical concerns and discuss the element of risks that could compromise its legitimacy.

**Key Words:**

Viral Marketing, Ethics, Advertising, Communication, e-Advertising, e-Marketing

**الملخص:**

على الرغم من الفترة القصيرة عن ظهوره كإحدى ابداعات التسويق الإلكتروني، إلا أن التسويق الفيروسي أحدث الكثير من النقاشات والاثارة على صفحات الويب وذلك بفعل النتائج التسويقية الاستثنائية التي ما فتئ يحققها من جهة والتجاوزات الأخلاقية الصادمة التي بدت وكأنها مقصودة في بعض حملات التسويق الإلكتروني من جهة أخرى. بناء على عرض وتحليل عدة حالات من حملات التسويق الإلكتروني المثيرة للجدل، يحاول هذا المقال أن يطرح القضايا الأخلاقية للتسويق الفيروسي ويناقش مخاطر التجاوزات الأخلاقية على المؤسسات ونفسها وعلى المجتمع.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:**

التسويق الفيروسي، الأخلاق، الاشهار، الاتصال، الاشهار الإلكتروني، التسويق الإلكتروني.

**JEL Code:**

M380, M370, M390, M140, K420, K490

**Introduction**

The Internet-based-technologies have led to a considerable expansion quantitatively and qualitatively in communicational channels either for companies or for people whom can use electronic newsgroups, blogs, virtual communities, instant messaging, social media, personal digital assistants (PDAs), etc. While traditional advertising campaigns require a lot of effort and resources to target a limited audience, internet technologies allow individual publishers, companies and institutions to reach or communicate directly with billions of customers worldwide (Vázquez-Casielles et al., 2013). Obviously with such advantages, companies will try to do their best to explore different innovative uses of Internet technologies in advertising field and adopt the recently emerged E-Marketing as a new strategy to support their communicational mix.

Although the proved effectiveness and efficiency of using Internet in advertising, particularly creating new communicational channels, companies are seeking for more involvement of the customer in their advertising efforts, which could occur in terms of contributing in spreading messages, providing useful feedback, proposing solutions for certain internal issues such as product design, packaging, branding, etc. In other word companies are looking for exploring the customer's sense of creation and invest what Kristensson et al. (2008, 476) call "shared inventiveness".

In the quest of this "shared inventiveness", Viral Marketing appears the most innovative solution involving customers and getting their contribution intentionally or unintentionally in advertising campaigns and attaining extraordinary results ever achieved by another publicity technic before (Sabri, 2017). Excited by the power of interpersonal networks and the uses of consumer-to-consumer (or peer-to-peer) communication channels (Daniasa et al., 2010), viral marketers do their best to reconfigure critical success factors of advertising focusing more on message attractiveness, message memorability, social network structures and incentives for sharing viral messages (Hinz et al., 2011). As a result, Viral Marketing succeeds to substitute the centuries-old marketing Word-of-Mouth (WOM) publicity and "isolates elements that cause people to stop watching ads and finds ones that keep them engaged, in addition to determine what kinds of ads are most likely to be shared and what types of people are most likely to share them" (Teixeira, 2012: 25).

Consequently, viral advertisers investing controversial taboo appeals as an executional cue in their viral campaign (Sabri, 2017), could break many advertising

records in terms of costs, speed of spreading “Virals” to millions of persons, affecting customers’ behavior and sales growth. Based on the famous phrase of marketers “Content is King” (Virajoti, 2014), Viral Marketing continues to create a real buzz on the web. However its ethics appear as a serious issue as many viral campaigns are being a witness of many ethical abuses and pose significant risks more than traditional advertising methods.

Based on many real cases, the present article discusses the ethical concerns of Viral Marketing as an advertising strategy and concludes the inherent risks that might be generated by ethical abuses which compromise seriously the legitimacy of Viral Marketing as a new advertising strategy.

## **1 - Viral Marketing: Buzz and ethical concerns**

### **1.1 - What makes Viral Marketing spread virally?**

Historically, the term of “Viral Marketing” was established by Steve Jurveston in 1997 in a Netscape newsletter (Porter and Golan, 2006) to describe the promotional campaign that he was utilizing to promote his new internet based e-mail program, Hotmail. As well, it is commonly agreed that the first Viral Marketing campaign has been launched by Hotmail’s tag line “Get your private, free e-mail” from Hotmail at <http://www.hotmail.com> (Woerndl et al., 2008). Since then, Viral Marketing practice spreads virally in the advertising sphere, creates its own buzz and becomes a “Hot Concept” as Porter and Golan (2006, 27) word. As a result, Viral Marketing becomes, within a short time, an important component of companies promotional mixes; either as a support to strengthen advertising campaigns or as an alternative tool for traditional advertising Medias to realize more effectiveness and efficiency.

The main principle of Viral Marketing has been inspired from the traditional advertising technic “word of mouth (WOM)”, which refers initially to the act of propagating marketing messages through the help and cooperation of individual consumers (Liu-Thompkins, 2012). Authors such as Litvin et al., (2008) confirm explicitly that and consider Viral Marketing the online version of word of mouth or the “electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)”, which refers to the use of informal communication to promote directly goods and services or their seller through Internet-based technology (Aghdaie et al., 2012). Going viral means a situation where the marketing message is broadly received by the targeted people whom utilize their social networks and invest their reputation to spread it widely (email, video, link...) using the “one-to-one” strategy or the “one-to-many” strategy (Skrob, 2005). Hence, the Viral

Marketing, called also: Social Media Marketing, Word of Mouth, Word-of-Mouse, buzz Marketing (Mellet, 2009), is considered as a “Buzz Marketing” as it consists of the amplification of initial marketing efforts by third parties through their passive or active influence (Thomas, 2004). By Buzz Marketing, marketers mean any act that can facilitate and encourage the diffusion of advertising messages via personal or social networks creating exponential exposition traffic of advertising messages.

Certainly, the involvement of the customer is the corner stone of the Viral Marketing; however, the trust among people concerned by spreading the viral content consists of a necessary ingredient to operationalize well the Viral Marketing campaigns. Cho et al. (2014) stress the role of the trust in new advertising strategy and consider it more important than the source of the message itself. In addition, Viral Marketing relies also on the availability of certain requirements such as free products or services, easy transmission, exploitation of common human motivations, use of existing social networks, and the use of others’ resources and infrastructure (Porter and Golan, 2006).

In term of cost, companies can launch viral campaigns at an insignificant cost, particularly whether they succeed to combine the excited material with the appropriate communication network (social media, email, YouTube...). Consequently, companies, from all sectors and different sizes, are adopting massively the Viral Marketing as a new advertising strategy; many of them have achieved surprising results as the following Blendtec Viral Marketing campaign witnesses.

In 2006, Blendtec’s new Director of Marketing launched a viral video campaign entitled "Will it Blend" in which the company’s CEO blended up several of non-food items in Blendtec blenders. The campaign comprises series of short viral videos, filmed by professional in-house, which show the CEO Tom Dickson and the R&D team blending up many things made from steel, wood, plastic, aluminum to test the product toughness. Among the blended products, videos showed the cutting-edge smartphone “iPhone” recently commercialized by Apple, which was a very smart ingredient! The campaign achieved an unparalleled success. Within five days of posting videos on YouTube and on the company’s own website, these videos had garnered over than six millions views. The campaign raised the company’s sales 700% and achieved a huge success media coverage (many television appearances, publicity events, keynote speeches, printed media articles, new blogs, co-promotional campaigns etc. (Briggs, 2009).

Many other successful campaigns reached also spectacular results. Among these campaigns we list: Ronaldinho: Touch of Gold (Nike), My Heart Will Go On (Free Macbook Air), Dynamite Surfing (Quicksilver), Do the Test (Transport for London), Subservient Chicken (Burger King) etc. (Altoft , 2008).

Stimulated by this spectacular successes, viral marketers realize that the best way to catch the attention of customers, particularly youth and internet users, is to present a spectacular or an unusual content and to use more informal and personal messages, since people react more to individualized messages, unofficial advertising channels, and unintended targets (Hota and Newlands, 2009) than to formal adds. Nevertheless, at what extent the message could be differentiated? Especially, if we know that the more the message contains revolutionary or “rebellious” elements breaking ordinary rules the more it becomes attractive and influencing. Many authors had already underlined this fact. For example, Kilby (2007) mentioned that “virals” which generate the best buzz tend to be the most controversial; and Liu-Thompkins (2012, 466) who stated: “an effective viral message should break through clutter and consumer indifference to encourage further pass-along of the message”.

## **1.2 - Viral Marketing: ethical concerns**

In the quest for the value and the market share, marketers use to take advantage of any possible technic to influence and convince customers to do the desired acts. Policies such as pricing, packaging, branding, advertising etc. become strongly customer oriented to the extent that sometimes such policies overcome intentionally or unintentionally legal and ethical boundaries. Indeed, marketers invest well the ambiguity of lines separating what is considered accepted socially and what is not accepted. Consequently, the “marketing function becomes within business firms the most often charged with ethical abuses” [Murphy and Laczniak (1981), 251]. A large part of these abuses is actually caused by the advertising activity, which is one of the main components of the mix marketing; despite the armada of regulations framing advertising practices and the considerable time and resources spent by marketers in complying with these laws and regulations (Snyder, 2011).

In fact, advertisers have gone to great lengths to influence customers’ behaviors regardless the controversies that could be raised by the reliability of the information or the kind of attractors or bothering consumers with undesirable ads etc.

Whilst the coming of the internet, as mentioned above, has reconfigured radically models and practices of advertising field, it has also modified dramatically many kinds of social interaction and individual behavior in personal and professional life. Moreover, the internet, which is considered an appropriate environment for unethical behaviors (Kurt and Hacıoglu, 2010), has given rise to new moral dilemmas as well as new attention to “old” ethical issues such as privacy, trust, and information reliability (Santana et al., 2009). In other words, the Internet is reshaping the borders of ethics and legality and making them more ambiguous (Goswami and Rajkumari, 2013). The

following practices are cases in point of new ethical challenges associated frequently to the internet use in advertising activities:

- Using log files and cookies, without the knowledge or consent of the consumers, to get personal information for marketing purposes;
- Disturbing people with intrusive advertisements such as banners and flashes;
- Providing deceiving or misleading information on products or services on the Internet;
- Not providing a secure environment for consumers to conduct online transactions;
- Providing inadequate information or service on grievance procedures for consumers to take action against the company in the case of any issues arising out of online purchases; and
- Selling personnel information of customers without their consent [Joshi and Ramadass, (2005), 142-143].

To illustrate the seriousness of damages that could be caused by unethical e-advertising, Gross (2012, 187) used an excellent metaphor to caricaturize the situation before and after adopting Internet solutions and stated: “The difference between a sheet of paper and the Internet can be seen, in some ways, like the difference between a knife and a gun—with all the intrinsic ethical controversies intact. Both can cause \*H\*arm, but, depending on the \*S\*ituation, one is capable of much more damage, much more quickly than the other”.

With regard to Viral Marketing, the first ethical concern, according to Wampole (2012), is the spamming practice. “Spams refers to unsolicited, promotional electronic mail usually sent in bulk to thousands or millions of Internet users” [Spinello (1999), 185]. Spammers gather customers’ personnel information using all possible ways regardless their legality or ethicality, since any rate of response, even it is very little, could be considered as a positive result particularly if certain persons forward the received email to their contacts or post it on their social Medias. Then the spamming practice is questioned from both sides: the sources of email addresses and sending emails to people without their agreement regardless if these emails bother them or are out of their domain of interests.

In fact, spamming practices have been a subject of strong criticisms from researchers, practitioners and “ethicists”. Accordingly, many countries issued laws and regulations that make spamming more respectful to the privacy and prohibit selling personal information without the consent of concerned people. The laws of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in USA are an illustrate example. In addition, spamming is encountered also by technological solutions. Both public Email hosts such as Hotmail,

Gmail, Yahoo etc. and private hosts' applications propose filters and specific applications to block spams, Junk mails and undesired messages. However spamming practices spread viral and become a favorite advertising activity among advertisers to the extent that it become associated with 'get rich quick' schemes as more and more individuals conduct business in cyberspace (Wampole, 2012). Thus, all companies could be accused by spamming practices including lawyers who are supposed to defend people against this privacy intrusion as they are also resorting to spammers to reach more large audience (Michael, 2004)!

While spamming gains more space as a favorite direct marketing tool, another serious ethical dilemma starts to disturb the extraordinary success of Viral Marketing. We mean here the consciously *well-conceived unethical* videos or images prepared to be spread virally on the Web, despite the awareness that evading ethical rules damages the relationships between organizations and their customers.

Despite the seriousness of Viral Marketing ethical concerns, scholars and researchers did not pay sufficient interest to the subject. Except certain studies related to e-marketing ethical issues such as spamming, a few number of researches tried to discuss the issue and highlight the potential ethical threats of Viral Marketing and their impacts with respect to both companies themselves and societal values.

Among the earlier scholars who questioned the ethicality of Viral Marketing Maxwell (2002) who presented to the Marketing Management Association Educators' Conference a paper entitled: "Is Viral Marketing ethical?" Maxwell underlined certain general unethical practices of Viral Marketing such as spamming, using the list contacts of others without their agreement, annoying consumers with big number of e-mails addressed to them from viral marketers... The author considered Viral Marketing as "an open invitation to spammers to make some quick money by using friendship to sell their goods and services" [Maxwell, (2002), 56].

The infamous cases of Viral Marketing, including cases from the political world where people and companies complain for being victims of viral campaigns, inspired Kilby (2007) to evoke the frontier of Viral Marketing emphasizing strongly on the embarrassment caused by unethical deliberate Viral Marketing campaigns. Kilby concluded that viral advertising certainly gets people talking and promotes brands on social networks, however also those virals that generate the best buzz tend to be the most controversial.

Swanepoel et al. (2007) published an article entitled "Virally Inspired: Gen Y Attitudes towards Viral Stealth Marketing". Based on the literature review, the article



debated the efficacy of electronic mediums and viral stealth marketing to disguise the relationship between the individual(s) conveying the message and the organization endorsing it. The article highlighted the gap in the knowledge pertaining to the viral component of stealth marketing, and presented proposals for further research regarding ethics and the effectiveness of this marketing technic as perceived by Y Generation.

Cox, Martinez and Quinlan (2008) debated the issue from the blogosphere side. In their article: "Blogs and the corporation: managing the risk, reaping the benefits", they summarized the positive and negative aspects of blogosphere which is one of the main virtual platform of Viral Marketing. The authors evoked blogs' ethics like unverifiable opinion, content falsification and Astroturfing<sup>(\*)</sup>. After presenting many cases of ethical skidding caused by blogs, they concluded that engaging in electronic communications places a corporation at risk of losing control of its public image. Corporations have therefore been slow to develop policies that allow them to take advantage of these new media.

Woochun et al (2009) highlighted educative system of gifted students in computer. They realized that computer programs for gifted students focus mainly on scientific knowledge and practical skills, neglecting ethical issues, which should be an integrative part of such programs. They proposed a system, which provides comprehensive areas of information and communication ethics for the gifted elementary school students in computer. The proposed system uses avatars to explain contents and guide students with voice message and deal with each subject in three steps: Introduction, Development and Discussion in order to make students learn ethics by discussion rather than learning by heart. The proposed system is supported by an online survey or vote to check students' changes in information and communication ethics.

In his article entitled: "Viral Marketing and imaginary ethics, or the joke that goes too far", Hoedemaekers (2011) accused clearly viral marketers for being accomplice in publishing unethical content and banning it after realizing the "jouissance" of spreading virally the intended scenes. The author mentioned that deliberately banning advertisement, as all forms of marketing and advertising, is an attempt to link the "jouissance" of watching the images or videos of the product in question to the status of complying with ethics.

The above cited contributions debated clearly and particularly the ethical concerns of Viral Marketing. Other scholars raised the issue but indirectly within other topics such

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<sup>(\*)</sup>Astroturfing is the use of paid agents to create falsely the impression of popular sentiment. In the advertising field the astroturfing is the practice of posting messages online anonymously, or by using false names, in order to generate buzz or ill will for an organization.



as the importance of emotion in marketing communication (Buck and Ferrer, 2012), Internet marketing ethics, as leverage of competitive advantage (Gauzent and Ranchhod, 2001) etc. However still the focus is more on spams and pop ups (Wampole, 2012).

## **2 - Method**

The present study is an exploratory research in nature as there is scant research and theoretical corpus about the ethicality of Viral Marketing. As the study aims at highlighting unethical practices of viral marketing and their risks on both companies and society, the author will use the case study method to illustrate the potential violation of ethical rules by viral Marketing.

Accordingly, three case studies of controverted viral marketing campaigns in addition to mentioning many other unethical practices in viral marketing campaigns.

The number of cases is considered sufficient regarding the scarcity of previous empirical research in controversial advertising (Moraes & Michaelidou 2017; Woerdl, 2008; Cinnamon, 2014) on one hand and their deliberating character on the other hand.

## **3 – Case studies Analysis and discussion**

### **3.1 - Case studies presentation**

As viral marketers realize that people easily remember what is shocking or controversial and comply well with principle of “forbidden fruit is the sweetest”, they conceive campaigns containing intentionally some unethical contents as ingredients in order to attract, particularly, 21st century consumers whom seem look more rebellious and more interested by unusual contents. Several cases of excited Viral Marketing campaigns witness such intentional ethical transgressions. The three following examples illustrate the extent to which Viral Marketing campaigns can go:

#### **Case 1: Rent a wife<sup>1</sup>:**

Emakina, a Belgian advert agency, conceived a viral campaign in which the video shows a man exchanging goods, but not any goods he exchanges his wife. Apparently, the website promotes the idea that customer can rent a wife among 9 500 ideal women who are in the ‘rent a wife’ catalogue. But in reality, it is a viral website created to promote another website, a real one, of renting DVD’s.

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<sup>1</sup>To see the video of this campaign: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=FR&hl=fr&v=fELjA6QEpdI>

This campaign did a great buzz and succeeded to make people talk about it. However, it is really hard to accept using men or women or familial linking to build a brand or promote products. Consequently, Belgian women's associations have reacted violently against this campaign that they consider it as an unacceptable ethical abuse.

### **Case 2: Polo: Small but tough<sup>1</sup>:**

The spot promotes VW's Polo model of Volkswagen, it begins with a motorist leaving his house and hopping into his Volkswagen Polo. The motorist appeared with a distinctly Middle Eastern (Palestinian) appearance who sports a black-and-white checkered "kaffiyeh" like the one commonly associated in the public mind with the died Palestinian President Yasser Arafat. Thus, by extension, with terrorists and suicide bombers. The driver pulls up in front of a busy restaurant with curbside seating (as women holding babies, talking on cell phones), pulls out a detonator, and depresses the button. Rather than causing widespread death and destruction, the muffled blast is completely contained by the car, leading to the end slogan: "Polo. Small but tough".

According to the UK newspaper The Guardian, the "suicide bomber" spot was created by the Lee and Dan team, a British pair who have produced before a number of other advertisements (including virals) known for their quirkiness. The duo maintained that the clip was a self-promotional work not intended for public viewing. Volkswagen Company and its agencies denied all knowledge of the spot.

### **Case 3: The Ka's Evil Twin case<sup>2</sup>:**

The third case is an advertisement for Ford Company. The ad video starts by a shiny empty new car parked on the driveway. Suddenly, the car's electronic sunroof opens itself. A cat cautiously approaching the car jumped on the bonnet and walked towards the opened sunroof. It sticks its head through the roof to peek inside the car. Suddenly, the car's sunroof closes again, choking the cat, which struggles until its head dropping onto the driver's seat. As the cat's lifeless body slides down the windshield, a slogan appears on the screen: "Ford Sport KA, the KA's evil twin" (Hoedemaekers, 2011). Ford denied, also, any connection with this Viral Marketing spot.

The three previous cases rise, really, many question marks. Are Volkswagen and Ford innocent? Do they have not any connection directly or indirectly with these campaigns? Does this way will become a new creative method for Viral Marketing?

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<sup>1</sup>To see the video of the campaign: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnSwz4IRGhE>

<sup>2</sup>To see the video of the campaign: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPbyCGyL7Ts>

What were the effects on the two companies' sales? These questions should be discussed seriously because such types of videos are seen by more people than TV ads and the concerned brands wouldn't mind the association that much whether these brands sanctioned the making of the virals or not (Kilby, 2007). In addition, denying or banning such ads could have double effects and achieve the hidden targeted objectives. [Hoedemaekers, (2011), 55] states that "banned adverts purposively and ostentatiously transgresses the Symbolic Law by going against its prescriptions. In doing so, it attempts to appropriate an impression of ethicality: it paints itself as 'too frank', 'toodaring', 'too rebellious', or 'too progressive'. It is precisely by virtue of its banned status that it gains this excessive dimension. The implicit strategy of these adverts is, therefore, to acquire an extra-symbolic quality, by having itself forcibly removed from the sanctioned domain of the other".

Mention is made of the fact that such cases do not concern only the business world, they concern also the politic world where many cases of viral attack are recorded. For example, the agency Asa Bailey has created a viral - [voteforchange.com](http://voteforchange.com) - hosted on a YouTube profile called SexyBritain. Asa Bailey, founder of the eponymous agency, alleges the viral has been commissioned by Tory backbenchers, while Conservative central office denies any involvement, although it does not deny rebel Tory MPs are behind the move (Kilby, 2007).

Certain viral campaign turned bad and generated backlash results damaging the company itself. The case of Virgin brand is an illustrate example. Virgin asked b3ta.com users, an online community known for bad taste jokes, to create a new ad for the Virgin Money brand. Entries included doctored images of Sir Richard Branson in compromising situations, which embarrassed strongly the company (Kilby, 2007).

Although viral marketing can be used to support strong values of the companies such as sustainability (Jankowski et al. 2018), these examples and many other attest strongly upon the "deliberated unethical behavior" adopted by some viral marketers, which must be debated deeply by all concerned parties.

### **3.2 - Viral Marketing ethicality: elements of risk?**

While ethical concerns of viral marketing derives from the ethical issues of marketing in general, considered already as the most function within the company the charged with ethical abuses, the negative impacts of viral marketing unethicity seem to be more serious than the other element of mix marketing. Any viral marketing campaign can achieve extraordinary results if viral marketers succeed to choose both the exciting element and the appropriate social network channel. However, any viral marketing campaign could also cause a very harmful effect and undesirable results on

the company in case of explicit unethicity exactly as it achieves exceptional positive results. In fact, this particular characteristic is due to certain elements of risk inherent to viral marketing itself, which are mainly:

### *Third-party involvement:*

The main problem that companies face when they are launching Viral Marketing campaigns is the involvement of the “third-party” in the process of spreading messages. After a certain phases of launching, the advertising message becomes out of the control of the company and its marketers. The infected people, whom are requested to send the message to their contacts, can modify it according to their tastes and preferences what Kwiatkowska (2009) calls the Viral Spoof, as it has happened with Virgin viral campaign. Thus, it becomes so hard for the company to control the traceability of its viral campaigns (Skrob, 2005) and assure the expected outcomes.

### *Irreversible Effects:*

Once the viral message is spread, the company could not do great thing neither to stop it in case of negative course nor to repair negative damages. Moreover, the message might reach records in views or transmissions to others if people realize that the concerned company tries to control the situation (Skrob 2005).

### *Astroturfing phenomenon:*

Astroturfing becomes a very important support for viral campaigns as it create seemingly spontaneous campaigns when Astroturfers are paid for well thought-out corporate marketing messages. If discovered, this practice can greatly damage corporate credibility (Cox et al., 2008).

### *Emotion investment:*

As content, which elicits negative emotions, results in greater electronic word-of-mouth (Henke, 2013), Viral marketers try to invest the strong relation between the emotion and the viral interaction that assure the infection of targeted people. In certain campaign, marketers invest well political issues, ethnic affiliations, religious believes, etc. then cause conflicts between different entities (countries, regional territories, ethnicities, religious groups...). The famous football 2009 crisis between Algeria and Egypt is a case in point. It started with a certain provocative images posted on internet and spread virally among the fan of the two countries. The result was a strong diplomatic crisis between the two countries and a hate feeling between the two publics and, obviously, a great successful for Medias that sponsored and exacerbated “professionally” the crisis.

## **Conclusion**

Viral Marketing has generated a lot of excitement recently, and no one can contest its exceptional advantages, extraordinary communicational achievements and distinguished contributions to the extent that becomes a revolution in the advertising field. However the ethical expense seems to be more serious compared to the other advertising-mix elements. In fact, this new situation is due to:

- Viral marketers invest more the ambiguity related to the concept of ethics, particularly in the virtual world, and the absence of rules framing the practice of viral marketing itself;
- Viral Marketing, as mentioned above, acts in a landscape characterized already by its readiness to be unethical and;
- Viral marketers realize well that viral phenomenon could not happen without using exciting elements which are mostly related to the forbidden and ethics.

Then, it seems that the unethical practices of viral marketing will be pushed continuously and deliberately to the extreme point as long as viral campaigns generate buzzes and excitement on the web. Accordingly, Viral Marketing legitimacy becomes compromised and challenging for both companies and the community. For companies the main challenge, in addition to setting an ethical based organizational culture, is how to maintain the control of viral campaign along the course of the message and avoid Viral Spoof practices. Concerning the deliberate unethical campaign, the issue becomes, actually, a legal concern and governments should be very firm and definite once the association between companies and such cases is proved.

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