



## How Does ALS Ice Bucket Challenge Achieve its Viral Outcome through Marketing Via Social Media?

By Agnes NG May Phing & Dr. Rashad Yazdanifard

*HELP College of Arts and Technology, Malaysia*

*Abstract-* In this digital era, anything catchy and amusing can turn into a trend or viral phenomenon with the help of social media, reaching out and impacting a large number of people. For example, Harlem Shake meme, Gangnam Style song by Psy, The Fox song by Ylvis and ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. The main focus of this paper is to study how the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge can turn from simply a dare game among a group of friends into fundraising campaign that succeed overnight through social media. It is vital to identify the success factors of this icy campaign so that it can turn into strategies which can be applied in other campaigns to produce similar remarkable result of ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. For this review, related journal articles which were found through electronic databases were studied and linked to the topic of this paper. The findings from the review of these journal articles suggested five aspects; namely social media marketing, celebrities' influence, online word-of-mouth phenomenon, viral marketing, and right-timing marketing had contributed to the outstanding result of ALS Ice Bucket Challenge.

*Keywords:* social media, marketing, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, ice bucket challenge.

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HOWDOESALSICEBUCKETCHALLENGEACHIEVEITSVIRALOUTCOMETHROUGHMARKETINGVIASOCIALMEDIA?

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# How Does ALS Ice Bucket Challenge Achieve its Viral Outcome through Marketing Via Social Media?

Agnes NG May Phing<sup>α</sup> & Dr. Rashad Yazdanifard<sup>σ</sup>

**Abstract-** In this digital era, anything catchy and amusing can turn into a trend or viral phenomenon with the help of social media, reaching out and impacting a large number of people. For example, Harlem Shake meme, Gangnam Style song by Psy, The Fox song by Ylvis and ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. The main focus of this paper is to study how the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge can turn from simply a dare game among a group of friends into fundraising campaign that succeed overnight through social media. It is vital to identify the success factors of this icy campaign so that it can turn into strategies which can be applied in other campaigns to produce similar remarkable result of ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. For this review, related journal articles which were found through electronic databases were studied and linked to the topic of this paper. The findings from the review of these journal articles suggested five aspects; namely social media marketing, celebrities' influence, online word-of-mouth phenomenon, viral marketing, and right-timing marketing had contributed to the outstanding result of ALS Ice Bucket Challenge.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease is a rare disease in which a person will lose his or her voluntary muscle action due to the progressive neurodegeneration that affects human's voluntary muscle action. In ALS, "motor neurons in the primary motor cortex, corticospinal tracts, brainstem and spinal cord movement" will degenerate (Wijesekera & Leigh, 2009). As a result, a person will encounter muscular paralysis as brain will not be able to transmit impulses and control muscle movement. Besides muscular problem, many researches are ongoing to find out treatments to cure secondary consequences such as malnutrition and respiratory failure which arise in ALS (Kieman, Vucic, Cheah, Turner, Eisen, Hardiman, Burrell, Zoing & Margaret, 2011). Until today, researchers have not identified entirely the root of ALS. Although there is no medicine or therapy available to heal ALS, the development of ALS can be slowed down using riluzole, a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved medicine (The ALS Association, n.d.).

*Author α σ: Center of Southern New Hampshire University Program HELP College of Arts and Technology.  
e-mails: agnes\_phing@hotmail.com, rashadyazdanifard@yahoo.com*

In the effort of promoting public awareness and raising funds for ALS, the wave of Ice Bucket Challenge had hit many social media platforms in the summer of 2014 and became one of the most renowned campaigns. This challenge originated by a group of professional athletes who challenged each other to take an ice bath and whoever declined to do so were required to donate \$100 to any charity organization chosen by the challenger (Song, 2014). This practice was then evolved and the rule of Ice Bucket Challenge was very simple – a person can choose to donate \$100 to the ALS Association or film a video of drenching his/her own self with ice water and pass on the dare to another three people. The social media platforms were gradually flooded with videos of people dumping buckets of ice water on their heads. Consequently, over the 30-days period of summer, the ALS Association reported that they had obtained donations which exceeded \$100 million (Song, 2014).

The aim of this paper is to study about a fruitful and popular fundraising campaign namely ALS Ice Bucket Challenge as well as trying to find out how marketing via social media can be so effective in promoting the fundraising campaign to attain such tremendous hit. Based on the reviewed articles, the accomplishment of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge campaign marketed via social media can be associated to five factors of success: social media marketing, celebrities' influence, word-of-mouth phenomenon, viral marketing and right-timing marketing.

## II. SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

In today's world, social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (Hyun, 2013) are available for anyone accessible to internet. They are often referred as online tools and network technologies for social interaction, connecting friends, family and even strangers from all corner of the world by allowing people to share contents, opinions, knowledge or information (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012) in form of message, picture and video.

Referring to the definition provided by American Marketing Association; Chisnall (1995); Shimp (2003); and Kotler and Keller (2009) as cited in Tomšič and Snoj (2014), it is concluded that basic mission of marketing is

to recognize and fulfill consumers' needs in the most lucrative way. Marketing on social media is different from communication of marketing in traditional media because social media encourage active participation of social network users (Zarella, 2009, p. 197 as cited in Tomše & Snoj, 2014) and allow one-to-many communication (Patino, 2012, pp.234).

With the continuous interaction and communication, people are allowed to change role from users to content creators or even promoter of a brand, product or event (Erragcha & Romdhane, 2014). Social media is an ideal platform to publicize ALS Ice Bucket Challenge based on the five pillars of social media—participation, openness, conversation, community and interconnection – specified by Welhoff (2012) as cited in Erragcha & Romdhane (2014). Social media encourage active participation from people by allowing them to voice out their thoughts through posting messages, pictures or even videos on their own social media page; allowing exchange of information or knowledge; providing a platform for users to communicate and interact; connecting people with common interests, forming a community; and interconnecting with other social media outlets.

Social media marketing is a “process of attaining web traffic and attention through social media” (Evans & McKee, 2010 as cited in Kuhikar, 2013). Smedescu (2013) defined social media marketing as “applying traditional marketing to the new Internet-based as means of interaction”. In short, social media marketing means online marketing which utilizes social media as a mean of marketing.

By creating distinctive and fun content, social media marketing program aims to attract social media users so that they would share the content within their social network and the content may go viral (Kuhikar, 2013). A campaign is able to achieve favorable outcome by choosing a suitable and correct social media platform as a medium to spread message; to project appropriate and desirable message; and to draw reliable people to reach out to others, to spread the campaign's message and significance (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012). By having the right people to communicate the message of a particular campaign, it aids the message to spread extensively and stimulate word-of-mouth phenomenon.

Tomše and Snoj (2014) suggested plusses such as “low cost”; “speedy spread” of message to people on the viral marketing basis; “global reach with the extensive network of users”; and the “capability to reply rapidly to the feedback posts”, turn social media into a good channel of marketing.

In addition, Blakeman and Brown (2010) as cited in (Luo, Wang and Han, 2013) stated that the use of social media for marketing and awareness can help to develop “community network”, nurture “awareness of community efforts” and “fund raising”.

Luo, Wang and Han (2013) had conducted a case study on the success of social media marketing in advertising the library of Tsinghua University, China in which five short videos entitled “Falling in Love with the Library” were filmed and posted on Youku, China's popular video sharing site. The massive popularity attained by the videos project contributed to the winning of 10<sup>th</sup> IFLA International Marketing Award. Content, style, venue and partnership are the four features of the video project which determined its success. Based on the library video project, these four features can also be used to explain how ALS Ice Bucket Challenge attained success through social media marketing. Firstly, to ensure the campaign message can be efficiently delivered to the target group, it is vital to create apt content. Secondly, the style of the message is also helpful in delivering the message. For instance, entertaining and carefree style of content are more effective and acceptable by people because it will be able to leave deeper impression as compared to serious style. Next, to captivate the target group, the venue to share the content should be a venue that is frequently accessed by the target group. Lastly, establishing right partnership with right the people will aid the process of content creating and sharing.

### III. CELEBRITY AS INFLUENCER

ALS Ice Bucket Challenge had gained massive attention across the nation in which many celebrities, world leaders and CEOs including Oprah Winfrey, Bill Gates, George W. Bush, Selena Gomez and Taylor Swift participated in drenching themselves with buckets of ice water. Celebrity is an eminent personality such as “actor, entertainer or athlete” who is well known publicly for his or her achievement (Stella & Yip, 2009).

Commonly, celebrity's endorsement is one of the favorite strategies that often being used in social media marketing since celebrity can help in creating attention and making an advertisement or campaign more eye-catching (Keel & Natarajan, 2012). There are many advantages of celebrity's endorsement such as helping in “brand identification” and “global marketing”. People will have better impression on the endorsement message delivered based on the celebrity's recognition, prowess and credibility (Dholakia & Sternthal, 1977; Hovland & Weiss, 1951 as cited in Keel & Natarajan, 2012; Abdussalam, 2014). Through the capability to attract the interest of consumers, people strongly believe that celebrities can shape a brand along with the image of a company (Abdussalam, 2014).

According to Stella and Yip (2009), Kelman's theory of identification suggested that in order to create self-defining relationship with a person, an individual will try to take up the “attitude, belief or behavior” of that person. Upon agreeing to Kelman's notion, many studies proposed that fans who are devoted to any

particular celebrity will be influenced by the celebrity, trying to impersonate the celebrity by adopting his or her lifestyles and values (Lindenberg, Joly & Stapel, 2011). Normally, they would be aspired to be like celebrities in terms of qualities such as pleasant outlook, fame and prosperity (Stella & Yip, 2009).

McCutcheon, Lange and Houran (2002) as cited in (Hung, 2014) indicated that studies had shown that there is a “one-sided, imaginary parasocial bonds” connecting the fans and their favoured celebrities. Since many celebrities engage actively in social media platform, fans like to follow the updates posted up by the celebrities on their social media account and discuss about them with people of similar interest. As a result, the mental and psychological boundaries between fans and celebrities will be narrowed, permitting fans to adopt celebrities’ viewpoint (Green, Brock, and Kaufman, 2004 as cited in Hung, 2014).

According to the Twitter counter in 2013, pop stars Justin Bieber, Lady Gaga and Katy Perry each has more than 30 million of followers on their Twitter accounts (Jin & Phua, 2014). Social influence will be highly remarkable with the massive number of followers a person can gather on his or her social media account. This is because when he or she posts something on the account, it could reach each of the followers who may share it on their social media platform, which eventually reach out to another few thousands of people. Therefore, if celebrities discuss a brand or deliver a message through social media, it could be seen by millions of people (Jin & Phua, 2014). This explains why ALS Ice Bucket Challenge can be in the limelight as many celebrities, athletes and world leaders participated in this icy event, spreading awareness about ALS. The personal expression and humor value in their videos of Ice Bucket Challenge had received much attention by their fans that each of the videos can reach millions of views. The image of the celebrities increased the credibility of this campaign. Similarly, in favor of emulating their favorite celebrities, it is not surprising to see some fans would take part in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge after their favorite celebrities whom they idolize have done it. Consequently, more people were attracted to contribute in ALS Ice Bucket Challenge.

#### IV. ONLINE WORD-OF-MOUTH PHENOMENON

Word-of-mouth (WOM) signifies the sharing of “noncommercial message” about a “brand, product, or service” between two or more people (Aslam, Jadoon, Zaman & Gondal, 2011; Kalpaklioglu & Toros, 2011).

Nowadays, social media is able to get people talking, interacting and communicating about a brand, an advertisement or a product. Through Nielsen study in 2010 as cited by Barreto (2014), Americans spent 906 million hours monthly on social network sites or blogs. In

May 2009, Anderson Analytics’ study found out that 46% of the respondents gave positive comments about a brand on company on social network site while 23% gave bad comments (Barreto, 2014). Based on the data collected, Barreto (2014) concluded that it is a norm for online WOM to occur in online social platforms.

People are no longer being confined by boundary since information from strangers can be accessed easily using web. Through social media platform, people can build the relationship with friends, family or even unknown people in a very short time. Social network facilitates spread of information as people can gain information not only from their friends, they can also obtain information from their friends’ friends. This occurrence is called online word-of-mouth (WOM) (Barreto, 2014).

Due to trust, people share information in groups and thus, it is expected that people in social network feel comfortable to share information since the information is shared only among their close friends. As compared to any type of message that originates from external sources, people are more inclined to believe something shared by one of their hundred friends in social network. This is because in some way, they know and trust their friends. Thus, this results to awareness and eventually “relationship building” are generated with the existence of social network (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012).

Also, Barreto (2014) suggested that WOM may happen due to the need of sharing information of common interest among people. For example, in the movie industry, there are many forms of online WOM such as “online reviews, discussion boards, chat rooms, blogs, and wikis” (Duan, Gu & Andrew, 2008) where consumers will exchange their evaluation about movies. WOM is about the power of existing consumers attract new consumers by sharing the contents as well as positive feedback. In their research, Duan, Gu and Andrew (2008) discovered that the sales of a movie will increase if WOM of that particular movie is positive.

Unconsciously, through WOM, people were generating publicity and spreading awareness about ALS within people of their social network through the uploaded videos of them dumping buckets of ice water on their head. On the other hand, the number of participants of Ice Bucket Challenge on social media platform multiplied with the interesting rule of nominating another three people after completing the challenge. Thus, it is not surprising that ALS Ice Bucket Challenge can achieve a remarkable result and help to raise much donations for the ALS Association.

#### V. VIRAL MARKETING

Bampo, Ewing, Mather, Stewart and Wallace (2008) defined viral marketing as mode of communication among peers who are encouraged to spread marketing messages within their social networks.

It refers to any strategy that will broaden the coverage and influence of a message by encouraging people to disseminate the message (Bampo et. al., 2008).

Viral marketing is a marketing method which depends on word-of-mouth (WOM) of consumers as a medium to spread messages (Yuping, 2012).

When WOM takes place, the distribution and sharing of information among consumers happens quickly (Woerndl et al, 2008 as cited in Cora, Tomita, Stuparu & Stanciu, 2010). In recent years, the scale of viral marketing broadens with the rising of social media because messages can be shared not only between family, close friends, and acquaintances, but also strangers. In viral marketing, one of the controllable factors is the process of viral diffusion which refers to "seeding strategy" (Yuping, 2012). Seeding strategy includes the practice of finding out the number and type of consumers (seeds) required to circulate a viral message. This practice is important since seed consumers whose responsibility is to initiate spreading of the viral message to other consumers can greatly impact the later round of viral diffusion process (Bampo et al., 2008; Watts and Peretti, 2007 as cited in Yuping, 2012).

The pros of viral marketing as compared to traditional advertising are lower cost, speedy diffusion of message, ability to reach out to wider range of consumers and high credibility (Bampo et al., 2008). The dispersal of the messages depends on consumers, thus viral marketing does not require high cost. Besides, viral marketing is not restricted by the limit of "standard media units", therefore, making it user-friendly (Gîrboveanu & Puiu, 2008). The consumers themselves will spread the marketing messages and ascertain the right target market whom will value the recommended "product, service or video clip" (Gîrboveanu & Puiu, 2008). Previous study had proven that virality is positively associated to positive and negative emotions which are activated by arousal such as amazement, anger and nervousness while virality is negatively associated with deactivating emotion such as sadness (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Berger and Milkman (2012) had also found out that besides "value exchange" and "self-presentation", people share exciting and unexpected content to keep others entertained.

The success of viral marketing is deeply stimulated by characteristics of the message conveyed, traits of sender or receiver and features of social network. This is proven through the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge whereby the meaningful and charitable message conveyed in it is expressed in a daring and entertaining value. Senders or receivers of the icy challenge are of people who are compassionate, open-minded and love taking up challenges. Social network has the features that allow people to post and share videos of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge – indirectly assisting viral spread of a particular message.

## VI. RIGHT TIMING

It is vital to conduct marketing at the right place and time through social media. Right-time marketing is about delivering the best marketing at the right time (Goldstein & Lee, 2005). The authors suggested that the company that practices right-time marketing will usually reach out to the consumers when they are more open and responsive to the message. Timing is very important because if the message is not conveyed at the appropriate time, it will not be able to leave a great impact on people. As stated by Diorio (2004) in Marketing Profs.com website, one of the companies which effectively utilized right-timing marketing strategies was Fidelity Investment. It went through millions of daily customers' transactions to find out over 100 "event triggers" which indicated when customers would require to make transactions. These "event triggers" directed the company to respond rapidly by offering right proposal to the right person at the right time, improving the campaign response rate by 200 percent. Likewise, the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge took place at the right time which is summer. The climate during summer matched the nature of the challenge which requires people to dump buckets of ice water on themselves otherwise with they will have to donate \$100 to ALS Association.

## VII. DISCUSSION

The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge is one of the best examples to validate how influential social media can be as a medium to market a campaign. This icy phenomenon gained massive attention across the nation in which many celebrities, world leaders and CEOs including Oprah Winfrey, Bill Gates, George W. Bush, Selena Gomez and Taylor Swift also participated to drench themselves with buckets of ice water. As reported in the Facebook Newsroom, during the period from 1<sup>st</sup> June 2014 to 1<sup>st</sup> September 2014, more than 17 million of shared videos on Facebook were linked to the Ice Bucket Challenge and those videos had been viewed by more than 440 million of people for total of 10 billion times ("The Ice Bucket Challenge on Facebook", 2014). Similarly, ALS Association reported that they had obtained donations which exceeded \$100 million through the chilly challenge event. Hence, how did ALS Ice Bucket Challenge achieve such remarkable result through marketing via social media?

One of the main factors which contributed to the attainment of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge is social media marketing which utilizes continuous communication among social media users to market the event. The five pillars of social media – participation, openness, conversation, community and inter connection which were listed by Welhoff (2012) as cited in Erragcha and Romdhane (2014) can be used to explain the reason social media is an ideal platform to

publicize the icy campaign. Firstly, users of social media are strongly encouraged to show participation in social media by posting or commenting about their thoughts in many forms such as message, picture and video on their social media page in which their updates will also appear in their friends' newsfeeds. For instance, Facebook has a "like" button function which is the quickest way that can be used to share a content the user like to his or her social network. Besides, there is also the "share" button which a user can use to forward an interesting post so that it can be shared on his or her page. By posting or sharing any ALS Ice Bucket Challenge posts, it helps to spread awareness of ALS extensively among the network of social media users. Besides, people can communicate and interact with one another through the exchange of texts in the comment box. Nowadays, many social media sites such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter are linked together whereby a person can post up an update or video about ALS Ice Bucket Challenge on many different platforms simultaneously. This update will then be published to a large group of people within his or her social circle. The message conveyed through the activity of dumping buckets of ice water on the head can be widely accepted by people as the content is significant. In addition to that, such entertaining challenge captivated a majority of the public's attention. The ice bucket challenge requires zero cost in disseminating the message through social media marketing unless the nominated person does not take up challenge within 24 hours after being summoned. Hence, the advantages of social media marketing brought success to the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge.

In addition, celebrities' involvement helped ALS Ice Bucket Challenge to be in the limelight. Eminent personality such as Oprah Winfrey, Bill Gates, George W. Bush, Selena Gomez, Justin Timberlake and Taylor Swift participated to drench themselves with buckets of ice water. Celebrities' fame and credibility helped to shape good image and create deeper impression in people towards ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. Subsequently, it attracted the interest of people to participate in the campaign. This can be seen through a certain group of people who participated in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge just for the sake of emulating their idols who joined the icy challenge. Consequently, more people were attracted to contribute in ALS Ice Bucket Challenge.

Nowadays, social media is able to capture people's interest in talking, interacting and communicating about a brand, an advertisement or a product. Online WOM phenomenon occurs when information spread through the shared posts on social media. As for example, when people post up or share a video of themselves or others throwing buckets of ice water on their head on social network, it will trigger WOM. This will eventually spread the news of

fundraising for ALS Association as well as creating awareness about it among the public. Besides, the rule of nominating another three people after completing the challenge initiated WOM as the number of participants of ALS Ice Bucket Challenge will be multiplied by three.

Through WOM, viral marketing could take place in which messages and awareness about ALS spread virally among people especially social media users. The campaign achieved higher credibility viral marketing because of the involvement of social media users in dispersing the messages. The positive vibe of the content encouraged the virality of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, matching the conclusion made by Berger and Milkman (2012) which stated that virality is positively associated to positive and negative emotions which are activated by arousal such as amazement, anger and nervousness while virality is negatively associated with deactivating emotion such as sadness. Ergo, the features of social network which permit people to post and share videos of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge encourage WOM. This is indirectly assisting viral spread of the message.

The timing during the spread of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge was perfect for the icy activity to be carried out. It became viral during summer, a time when students have summer school break and many have a more hassle-free working schedule. Moreover, the weather during summer matched the nature of the ice bucket challenge in which people are required to dump buckets of ice water on themselves. They will be able to withstand the coldness from the ice and in fact, it will help them to cool themselves down in the hot weather.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The wave of Ice Bucket Challenge hit many social media platforms in the summer of 2014 in the effort of promoting public awareness and raising funds for ALS. Through the study conducted on ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, five factors that contributed to the accomplishment were identified – social media marketing, celebrities' influence, word-of-mouth (WOM) phenomenon, viral marketing and right-time marketing. ALS Ice Bucket Challenge used social media as a mean of marketing in which the platforms of social media act as a venue for the spread of awareness. Celebrities' participations attracted people to pay more attention towards the campaign. As people shared videos of themselves taking up the challenge, it encouraged WOM on the campaign and assisted viral marketing. The timing during the spread of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge was perfect for the icy activity to be carried out. Aside from creativeness and entertainment value, ALS Ice Bucket Challenge applied positive impact on society that more and more people are conscious about the existence of ALS disease. Therefore, besides having fun, people felt good and united for being able to

contribute to the community through the chilly event. All in all, ALS Ice Bucket Challenge is a good example to exhibit the power of marketing in making a campaign spread virally. It is certainly a brilliant idea for more researches to be conducted to have a deeper and clearer understanding on the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge in order for such fulfilling and rewarding achievement to be attained again in other campaigns near future.

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