



# Examining Viral Marketing and the Diffusion of the Gospels

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**F**or marketing, the ability to get consumers to spread favorable influential information about a product or service is the holy grail. Pastor Thomas Stone (1837) delivered a sermon stating, "If, when fully set before men, the Gospel has not power to select and gather to itself so many from all classes of men, only one question remains: *Is it probable that it will, in fact, be set before all men?*" (p. 12, original in italics) This paper examines a method to identify what factors influenced the diffusion of the Gospels and how this information can be applied to today's newest marketing.

## Viral Marketing

Juvertson and Draper (1997) coined the term viral marketing to describe

the proliferation of Hotmail's free email service. Juvertson (2000) defined viral marketing as "network-enhanced word of mouth" (para. 2) and posited it is "...more powerful than third-party advertising because it conveys an implied endorsement from a friend." (para. 3) Viral marketing is an extension of word of mouth marketing (Swanepoel, Lye, & Rugimbana, 2009). While word of mouth marketing refers to person-to-person oral communication in which a message about a product or service is relayed (Arndt, 1967), viral marketing often refers to electronic person-to-person dissemination (Swanepoel et al.). Word of mouth marketing is widely accepted as an important and influential marketing concept (Davidow, 2003) and viral marketing has been shown to exponentially spread product or service information

to interested consumers by other consumers (Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2002). Wilson (2000) defined viral marketing as "...any strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and influence."

Dasari and Anadakrishnan (2010) posit there are five types of viral marketing:

1. Pass-Along – Chain letters are an example of this form of viral marketing. Consumers are encouraged to pass along information for a reward for taking action or avoid punishment for not taking action.

2. Incentivized Viral – This is an effective method to increase referrals as long as consumers are required to take action such as passing along a message or referring other's email addresses before receiving an incentive.
3. Undercover Marketing – Initially it is not obvious that anything is marketed because a marketing message just appears to be a unique or unusual page, activity, or piece of news.
4. Edgy Gossip or Buzz Marketing – This occurs when controversial messages are used in advertisements or as part of a marketing message (e.g., an actor leaking controversial or private information prior to a new movie release).
5. User-Managed Database – This structured form of viral marketing grows by having users invite others to join their communities. Users create and manage their databases.

indicated that 18 to 25-year-old unemployed males were likely to engage in viral marketing. Also, 54% of participants were willing to send viral messages and 96% would send them for an incentive. Most participants preferred to receive viral messages in their email (80%), mobile (68%), and both email and mobile (50%). Childs, Gingrich, and Piller (2009) concluded that 14% of Gen Y trust advertisements and 78% trust peer recommendations. Palka et al. (2009) likewise conducted grounded research and identified security related, social, and attitudinal conditions that impacted receipt, usage, and forwarding motivations.

Brown et al. (2010) examined the impact of comedic violence in viral

sender/receiver relationship that is likely to cause a message to go viral? For Christians, the most viral message is God's words that were first passed down through oral tradition (DeSilva, 2004). As previously mentioned, the Gospels do not possess self-diffusive powers (Stone, 1837). Yet the Gospels have been shared for nearly 2,000 years. What is it about the Gospels that have attracted people around the world to seek out "the word" and to spread its message? What can we learn from the purpose of the Gospels that might explain how and why messages are spread?

### Diffusion of the Gospels

Research into understanding why a message goes viral has focused



Swanepoel, Lye, and Rugimbana (2009) indicated a sixth form of viral marketing is stealth viral marketing. This form of viral marketing is spread by individuals that are paid to spread messages, but do not disclose their financial incentive.

### Literature Review

Most of the research regarding viral marketing focuses on the motivations and behaviors of those passing on email or mobile messages (e.g., Shukla, 2010; Dasari & Anandakrishnan, 2010; Palka, Pousttchi, & Wiedemann, 2009) and characteristics of the message (e.g., Brown et al., 2010; Davidow, 2003).

Dasari and Anandakrishnan (2010) also examined key factors that influenced individuals to receive and send messages. Their study in India

marketing. They concluded that violence intensity and consequences of severity increased memory retention, involvement, and likelihood the message would be passed along. Cruz and Fill (2008) identified key criteria to measure the success of viral marketing. To identify key criteria, they explored the nature and characteristics of viral marketing campaigns such as humor level, shock level, penetration, attitude towards the ad, loyalty, reach, hits/downloads, reason for transmission, informativeness, and credibility.

Every day, new marketing messages are transmitted using various forms of media and information distribution channels. Research into viral marketing has yet to answer the question, is it the message, method of delivery of the message, or the

around the motivations and behaviors of those passing on messages (e.g., Shukla, 2010; Dasari & Anandakrishnan, 2010; Palka, Pousttchi, & Wiedemann, 2009) and characteristics of the message (e.g., Brown et al., 2010; Davidow, 2003). In an effort to understand why the Gospels were spread, it is important to understand the motivations and behaviors of those passing on the message, the characteristics of the message, or both?

Perhaps a first step in answering the previous question is to understand the genre of the Gospels to understand their purpose (DeSilva, 2004). DeSilva posited the Gospels would likely be in the genre "... among the Lives which focused on the deeds and sayings of illustrious

**Figure 1. Socio-rhetorical Model of Textual Communication**

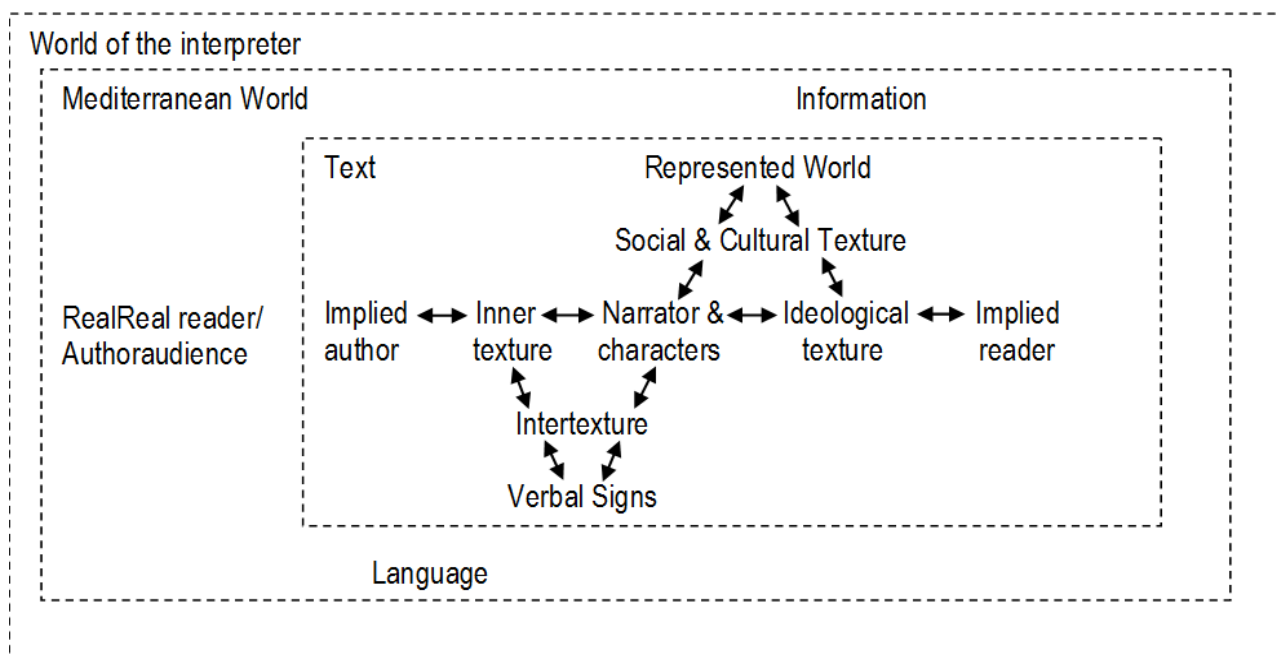


Figure 1. Adapted from *The tapestry of early Christian discourse: Rhetoric, society, and ideology* by Vernon K. Robbins (1996, p. 21).

persons. The ancient reader would have come to the Gospels expecting them to articulate and defend the significance of Jesus, and to legitimate the value system embodied by the figure of Jesus.” (p. 147, italics in original) Is it possible or likely that the Gospels were spread because of characteristics about the message such as the controversy surrounding Jesus as a man, his stories of healing, and/or controversial stories such as his crucifixion and resurrection?

If the Gospels were spread because of characteristics of the message, what significant characteristics existed and currently exist? The meaning of all text exists within a context (Robbins, 1996b). Social and cultural changes influence the meaning, yet all text is written within a specific context (Robbins). Over time, the reader or message recipient is likely to be influenced by social and cultural beliefs and attitudes (Robbins). Thus, they are likely to experience different meaning than the intended meaning (Robbins).

Robbins (1996b) posited that to interpret texts, texts need to be viewed as interwoven networks of meaning and can be interpreted using socio-rhetorical criticism. Socio-rhetorical criticism is a broad-based analytic approach that challenges readers to utilize multiple approaches to “...explore a text from different angles, to see multiple textures of meanings, convictions, beliefs, values, emotions, and actions.” (Robbins, 1996a) Socio-rhetorical criticism is concerned with analysis and interpretation of a text in the context of readers in late antiquity and modern day, and past and present methods of interpreting the New Testament (Robbins, 1996b).

Socio-rhetorical criticism allows interpreters to investigate each of the four arenas: inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, and ideological texture separately and in relation to each other (see Figure 1, Robbins, 1996b). A complete interpretation includes the “...interrelation among the author, the text, and the reader.” (Robbins, p. 39)

If diffusion of the Gospels occurred because of characteristics of the message, social and cultural texture and ideological texture are likely to reveal significant characteristics. Significant characteristics of a message are likely to be revealed through these forms of analysis because through understanding the social and cultural nature during the time a text is written, dominant or prevailing attitudes, norms, beliefs, and values can be identified.

### Social and Cultural Texture

According to Robbins (1996a), “The social and cultural texture of a text refers to the social and cultural nature of a text as a text. A text is part of society and culture by the way it views the world (specific social topics), by sharing in the general social and cultural attitudes, norms, and modes of interaction which are known by everyone in a society (common social and cultural topics) and by establishing itself vis-a-vis the dominant cultural system (final cultural categories) as either sharing

in its attitudes, values, and dispositions at some level (dominant and subcultural rhetoric) or by rejecting these attitudes, values, and dispositions (counterculture, contraculture, and liminal culture rhetoric)."

### **Ideological Texture**

According to Robbins (1996b), ideology has meant and continues to mean different things to different people. Ideology in socio-rhetorical perspective is the way in which what we say and believe connects with the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in...those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power. (Eagleton, 1983, p. 15 as cited by Robbins, 1996b, p. 36)

Ideological texture of texts lies in the "...arena between the implied reader and narrator and characters." (Robbins, 1996b, p. 36) Ideology influences the message and the way it is received by the narrator and characters (Robbins). Robbins noted that ideological texture is concerned with the particular alliances and conflicts nurtured and evoked by the language of the text and the language of the interpretation as well as the way the text itself and interpreters of the text position themselves in relation to other individuals and groups (1996a, para. 3). At present, the spectrum of ideology for socio-rhetorical criticism occurs in four special locations: in texts, in authoritative traditions of interpretation, in intellectual discourse, and in individuals and groups. (1996b, p. 193)

The implied reader is the reader suggested by the text and for whom the real author writes (Robbins, 1996a). The implied reader receives "textual clues by an actual reader" and these clues provide the implied

reader with the knowledge and ability to "fully comprehend the story and message of a text." (Robbins, 1996a, para. 7)

### **Ideology in Texts**

John H. Elliott defines ideology as "...an integrated system of beliefs, assumptions, and values, not necessarily true or false, which reflects the needs and interests of a group or class at a particular time in history (Davis, 1975, p. 14)." (Robbins, 1996b, p. 193) Thus, the goal with understanding the ideology of the text is to "...explore the manner in which the discourse of a text presents comprehensive patterns of cognitive and moral beliefs about humans, society, and the universe that are intended to function in the social order." (Robbins, p. 193)

Through social and cultural texture and ideological texture analysis, one can identify particular characteristics within the messages found in the Gospels. John 20:30-31 and John 21:25 indicate that the authors of the Gospels knew more of Jesus' accomplishments, yet did not record them all. Why were the stories in the Gospels recorded while other stories were not?

It is also likely that the diffusion of the Gospels occurred due to the sender/receiver relationship. According to the theory of planned behavior by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), an individual's behavioral intention is likely predicted by his/her belief or attitude toward a behavior, his/her perceived behavioral control, and his/her subjective norm which is a belief that a behavior should or should not be performed based on social pressure. Current research indicates that messages that are controversial, possess comedic violence, or are humorous are likely to be spread as long as the messages are not too extreme (Brown et al., 2010).

Therefore, this indicates that an individual's intention to pass along a message will be influenced by their beliefs and attitudes regarding the nature of the message and how they feel transmitting the message will be received. To determine the influence of the sender-receiver relationship, inner texture and intertexture analysis can help identify the nature and meaning of this relationship.

### **Inner Texture Analysis of Texts**

Robbins notes that "The inner texture of a text refers to the various ways the text employs language to communicate. This includes various types of linguistic patterns within a text (progressive and repetitive textures), structural elements of a text (narrational and opening-middle-closing textures) the specific manner a text attempts to persuade its reader (argumentative texture) and the way the language of a text evokes feelings, emotions, or senses that are located in different parts of the body (sensory-aesthetic texture)." (1996a)

Inner texture communicates by having a reader that 'receives' the message of a text (Robbins, 1996b). According to Robbins, "readers put their own ability to speak, hear, see, think, act, smell, taste and feel – their nature as 'subjects' – into texts (p.28)." Robbins explains there is an issue with communication since interpreters may treat "narrators, characters, authors, and readers as 'objects' or as 'subjects' when he or she 'brings them to life' (p. 28)." Robbins posits there is much to be gained by considering both approaches thus socio-rhetorical criticism tries to nurture the interactive subject-object interpretation of texts.

According to Robbins (1996b), "socio-rhetorical criticism does two things with intrinsic or text-immanent analysis. First, it sets these 'disciplinary' results in dialogue with other disciplinary results that are the

product of exploring other textures of a text. Second, it adds the real reader/audience as an interactive counterpart of the real author in the construction of the inner texture of the text (p.30)."

### Intertexture Analysis

According to Robbins (1996b), intertexture analysis is a process in which the "interpreter works in the area between the author and the text, not between the text and the reader (p. 96)." Intertexture analysis requires the interpreter to "explore other

texts." "The object of the analysis is...to interpret aspects internal to the text under consideration (p. 96)."

Robbins defined intertexture analysis as, "Text's representation of, reference to, and use of phenomena in the 'world' outside the text being interpreted. This world includes other texts (oral-scribal intertexture) other cultures (cultural intertexture) social roles institutions, codes and relationships (social intertexture) and historical events or places (historical intertexture)" (Robbins, 1996a, para. 11).

Figure two shows a model of how using socio-rhetorical criticism can help inform how the Gospels were diffused and continue to spread.

Therefore, when determining why a message is likely to go viral, it is beneficial to examine both the message characteristics and the nature of the sender-receiver relationship (see Figure 2). In an effort to understand why the Gospels were spread and continue to be spread, intertexture analysis can provide information about the sender-

**Figure 2. Use of Socio-Rhetorical Criticism to Understand Viral Marketing**

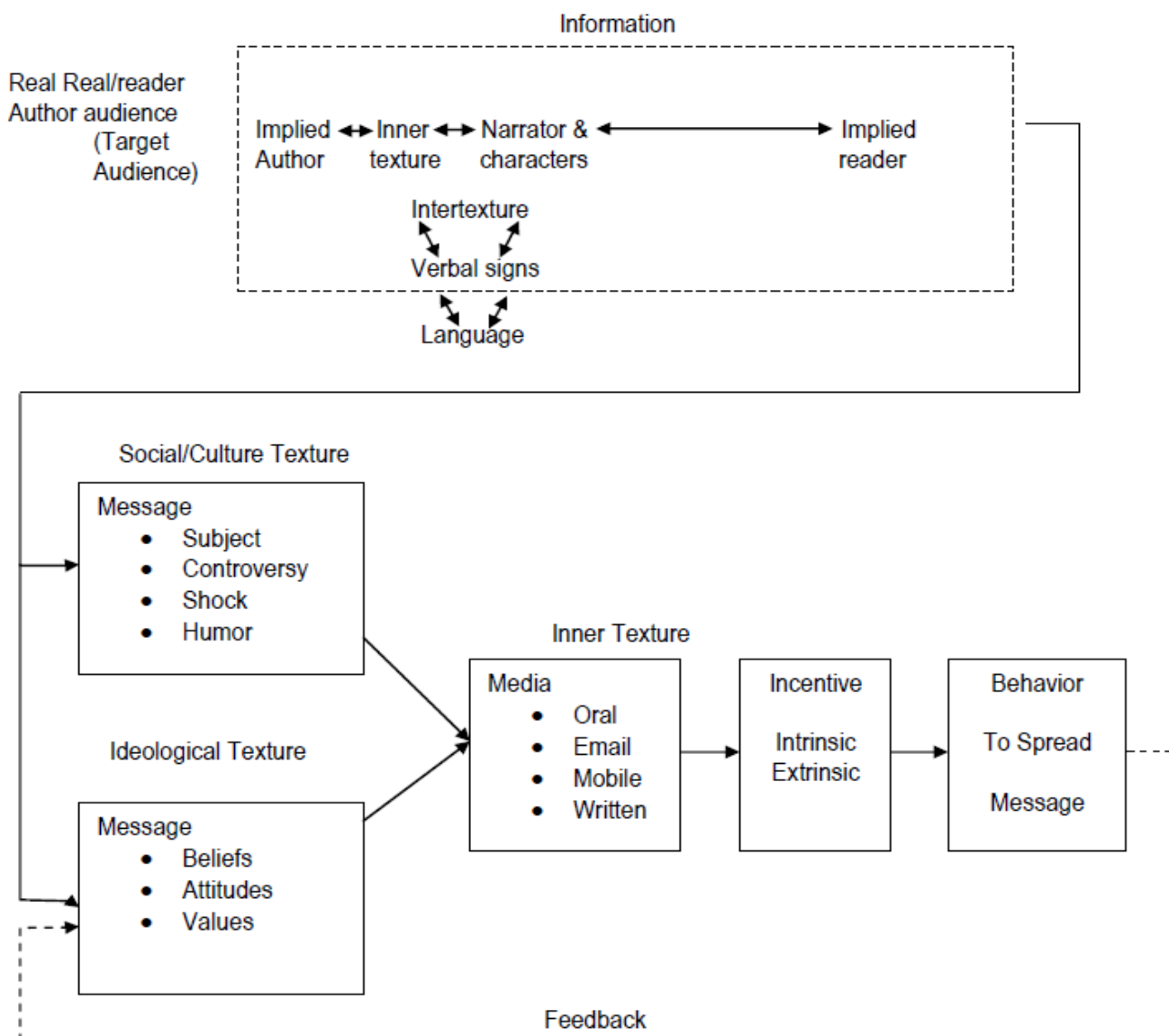


Figure 2. Model adapted from *The tapestry of early Christian discourse: Rhetoric, society, and ideology* by Vernon K. Robbins (1996, p. 29). Model of socio-rhetorical criticism model by Robbins adapted for use to examine the diffusion of the Gospels.



receiver relationship and the message creators understanding of the target audience.

**Intertexture Analysis.** Intertexture analysis is a starting point to understanding the purpose and author's expected impact of the message creation.

**Social Texture and Cultural Texture Analysis.** For a message to go viral, something about the content or characteristics of the message must compel the reader to take action. Is it the subject of or brand in the message, controversy, humor, or shock factor that makes the message worth spreading? Social texture and cultural texture analysis can provide insight into the characteristics of the message.

**Inner Texture Analysis.** Inner texture analysis can be used to reveal how the authors of antiquity

communicated language effectively. Today, this would be similar to studying the effects of media choice and effectiveness used in transmitting a message.

**Incentives.** Today, consumers may receive extrinsic incentives (e.g., products, services, money) or intrinsic incentives (e.g., recognition) for spreading a message. Why would recipients, either hearing or reading, the Gospels be compelled to spread the message?

**Feedback.** Based on feedback from spreading a message, senders are likely to send the message out to others. Similarly in antiquity, depending on the response of sharing the message a person would or would not be motivated to share the message again.

## Summary

The proposed model depicted in figure 2 suggests a number of avenues for future research. The proposed model highlights the challenge in understanding successful viral marketing: What factors (message characteristics, motivations and behaviors of senders and receivers, or both) are important for successful viral marketing campaigns? It also highlights the likely influence of social, cultural, and ideological factors. Technology and media mix are likely to influence the diffusion of the message. Future research should examine these factors and other possible confounding variables such as age and gender. Finally, future research should exam the use of incentives.



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## Notes

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