

Consumers who engage with trends may be less open to advertising than others

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One common assumption in digital marketing is that individuals who are mindful of what's trending on social media, and propagate these trends, will be responsive to social media advertising and marketing, thus sharing branded messages with their network on a wide scale. As a result, firms increasingly try to mesh their brand or product with an emerging trend to get the attention of those who propagate these trends. A new study conducted by researchers from London Business School, MIT Sloan School of Management, and Cass Business School at City, University of London, may change that assumption.

The study "Advertising to Early Trend Propagators: Evidence from Twitter," which will be published in the INFORMS journal *Marketing Science*, is co-authored by Anja Lambrecht of London Business School, Catherine Tucker of MIT Sloan School of Management, and Caroline Wiertz of Cass Business School.

The researchers found after extensive testing that, "early propagators of trends are less responsive to [advertising](#) than consumers who embrace trends later."

The study centered on how firms target marketing and advertising to consumers who are identified as embracing and propagating the spread of new information on emerging and "trending" topics on social media. What the researchers sought to clarify is whether those early trend propagators are truly responsive to firm-sponsored messages or advertising.

"We define early trend propagators as individuals predisposed to participate in an online conversation on a topic that is about to, or has just started, trending on [social media](#)," said Caroline Wiertz.

They used data from two field tests that were conducted by a charity and a fashion firm to target ads at consumers who embraced a Twitter trend early in its lifecycle by tweeting about it. The researchers then compared the behavior of these 'early trend propagators' against that of consumers who posted about the same topic later in the trending lifecycle.

"In both field tests, we targeted ads in the form of 'promoted tweets' to Twitter users who had posted messages containing phrases related to trending topics," said Catherine Tucker. "We then continued targeting ads to users who posted on the same topic when it was no longer trending. We then compared the response of both groups to identical ads."

In their field studies, the researchers operationalized early trend propagators as those who post on Twitter using a keyword or hashtag that is trending on a given day. "Throughout our field tests, engagement with the ads was lowest when targeting early trend propagators and higher when targeting individuals who embraced the trend on subsequent days. Engagement on Twitter mainly refers to clicks and retweets so these results mean that early trend propagators are less likely - and not more likely - to respond to advertising messages than other individuals and also less likely to share them" added Anja Lambrecht.

"It is plausible that early posting related to emerging trends may be driven by a desire to provide content that leads to recognition and acclaim from followers," said Caroline Wiertz. "Twitter users who engage with trending topics may be extrinsically motivated and particularly care about status rewards. They use trending discussions to conspicuously present themselves as the rapid pace of Twitter makes

being on top of the latest trends one way to signal that they are 'in the know.' Early trend propagators engage with and propagate content that serves this purpose and therefore have little reason to engage with advertising."

What this means to marketers is that targeting advertising to early trend propagators, that is to those individuals who engage with a trend when the [trend](#) originates, may be less effective in spreading advertising messages than marketers previously thought.

More information: Anja Lambrecht et al. Advertising to Early Trend Propagators: Evidence from Twitter, *Marketing Science* (2018). [DOI: 10.1287/mksc.2017.1062](#)

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