
Human perception on email marketing messages from a catering company

An applied study on how humans behave depending on the type of message they receive from a catering company

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Abstract

Email marketing is a tool on which most of today's greatest companies rely heavily. However, despite its potential to reach all the customers that a company has in its database at once, it is critical to see how different ways of framing an email marketing message can impact the customers' perception about that certain message and thus, predict how a customer will act upon it. Although, it is a subject with enormous study potential, not many researchers have explained the importance of framing email messages. For this paper there were designed four different surveys, two of them encapsulating socially and financially framed referral marketing messages, and the other two encapsulating socially and financially framed coupon marketing messages. It has been found that individuals, considered potential clients of a catering company are more likely to refer a friend when they are confronted with a message that is socially framed compared to financially framed. Unexpectedly, individuals are also more likely to place an order using a coupon code when they are confronted with a socially framed message rather than financially framed. As a matter of fact, it seems that, overall, messages that are framed socially are more influential than messages framed financially. These findings contribute to the email marketing and message framing literature and offer useful new insights not only for catering companies, but all businesses that actively use email marketing.

Keywords: email marketing, referral marketing, coupon marketing, perception, framing, financial, social

Introduction

Before marketing or advertising were even considered common activities or professions, human beings were attempting to influence one another's view upon different subjects. It is widely known that human perception is an endlessly debatable matter, as people generally beg to differ in terms of thought. Given both the timelessness and the notoriety regarding this point of departure, researchers, regardless of their field of expertise, have always had heightened interest with respect to the scrutiny of human perception. This paper is created on the premise that marketing is actually based on the earlier mentioned. It is no secret that, nowadays, marketers around the globe carefully track their targets' habitual way of operating throughout their electronic devices (smartphones, smartwatches, laptops, etc.) in order to gain knowledge on how they perceive different messages or scenarios. In this way, marketers know what kind of message they will have to transmit so that their targets will be impacted and, eventually, act upon it.

However, perception was taken to an entirely different level due to the accelerated growth of digitalization. Since its emergence, the internet enabled people around the globe, that normally wouldn't have at hand the possibility to interact, to connect in an instant. Naturally, this was leveraged by many individuals in several modalities, but companies that heavily relied on marketing won the golden ticket. Suddenly, they were able to reach millions of people with different kinds of advertisements in all sorts of forms. Hence, being able to gain personal data much easier and in bigger masses, but also have a greater impact on individuals' perception.

Even if individuals are genetically built as to have different particularities in terms of act and thought, these are considered more or less influenceable entities. At the same time, due to the rapid development of the internet during the last two decades, along many other practices, marketing matured severely. It got extraordinarily influential by virtue of the rapidity it can be spread across the world and the several techniques refined once with technological advancement. Henceforth, although nowadays companies have countless powerful marketing techniques at their disposal, word-of-mouth (from now on referred to as WOM) is considered to be one of the most influential on what people know, feel, and do (Buttle, 1998). Actually, the today's very popular referral marketing can be seen as a descendant of WOM marketing. Buttle (1998) described that companies are genuinely harnessing the effectiveness of WOM by attempting to incentivize customers towards referring friends and family.

Given the fact that the digital world is still in continuous rapid development, it is utmost reasonable that marketing is also perpetually developing in all sorts of forms. Marketing can be executed both offline and online and there are several techniques to accomplish these. Even if one talks about email marketing, social media marketing, referral marketing, coupon marketing, or physical events, there still are considerable emerging marketing styles.

There is no need to say that a marketer's main goal when transmitting a message is to make the receiver act upon that certain message. As follows, the format and formulation of a marketing message is critical for it to be considered a successful one. A successful marketing message is usually easily relatable and empowering for the targeted audience. It seems that social status and money are two important drivers, these often being used as incentivizers given the fact that most people find these relatable. There are several researchers that talk about social versus monetary awards and, as a matter of fact, empirical analysis demonstrates that social rewards, such as positive social feedback or social status, are activated within the same brain section as monetary rewards (Saxe & Haushofer, 2008).

Nevertheless, nowadays, referral marketing and coupon marketing are arguably among the most popular marketing practices, biggest of digitally enabled service companies using these as vital modalities of acquiring new users and retaining old ones. Messages that contain monetary or social stimulus appear to be as most influential among what drive people to act upon them. Thus, perhaps one of the most enticing topics that are forthwith up for debate is whether marketing email messages formulated expressing monetary and social incentives can impact individuals' perception in different ways and in what fashion do their reactions differ depending on distinct demographics. Accordingly, this paper's research question is **“How do the potential clients of a catering company respond to monetary and social impact messages, and how do their reactions vary across gender, age and education?”**.

The research question will be examined via four marketing emails created especially for the sake of this study, in collaboration with the catering company named Good Food Consulting SRL (branded and referred to as TOOD). The emails are evenly divided into coupon marketing emails and referral marketing emails, each of them having a message formulated so that they, in turn, express a monetary and a social incentive. So, this paper will be scrutinizing the supposedly different perceptions and reactions of diverse individuals when confronted with these marketing emails. A survey was designed for this matter, its purpose being to enable more or less exact measurements of people's feelings while going through the different emails. The

company is operating within the food sector, fulfilling one of the primary needs of human beings, namely hunger. For this type of companies email marketing is increasingly common, especially if we are talking about referral or coupon marketing, thing that makes it a considerable case to investigate.

Literature Review

This section aims to introduce the theoretical infrastructure of the thesis at hand. The literature used for completing this thesis paper is various. From journals, articles, and publications to books and many other other academic research papers were studied in order to create this theoretical infrastructure. Understanding what marketing is and what are its different techniques and what is human perception are crucial starting points to getting the fullest out of this research. E-mail marketing and then referral and coupon marketing will be highlighted amongst marketing techniques as these were used within the survey designed for this study. Also, studying the framing effect and social effect phenomena while comprehending the underlying mechanism of monetary rewards represents a cornerstone to understand the depth of the study at hand.

Human perception

Human perception is described as being a set of processes that individuals use to comprehend different stimuli encountered (Lumen, n.d.). Moreover, one's perceptions are based on the modality in which he or she interprets different sensations (Lumen, n.d.). It is considered general knowledge that all humans are genetically built different, so it is almost self-explanatory that they also differ in the way in which they interpret sensations.

Isohella et al., 2017 elaborate on how humans perceive the adoption and the utilization of digital marketing tools in micro-enterprises from Finland. They conclude that the perceived benefits related to cost efficiency, targeting, performance measurement and building relationships and company brand lure new business ventures towards adopting and utilizing digital marketing (Isohella et al., 2017). On the other hand, what is seen as challenging is the extensive timeframe in which digital marketing activities must be undertaken and the developing of enticing and valuable content (Isohella et al., 2017). Henceforth, it is concluded that a marketing plan along with a set of digital marketing artefacts defined as time-manageable and well-documented are essential to carry out effective digital marketing practice (Isohella et al., 2017).

Additionally, Levy & Gvili (2015) state that even though communicating digitally enables easier information sharing and spreading electronic WOM (or e-WOM), many find assessing message and source credibility a problematic issue. Their study suggests that individuals assess e-WOM messages looking at three key channel properties: social capital, information richness,

and interactivity (Levy & Gvili, 2015). They wrapped the study up by mentioning that the managers that administer marketing channels should make sure that tools which heighten information must be used to improve channel credibility (Levy & Gvili, 2015). Moreover, it was recommended that marketers share e-WOM through varied and socially unrelated e-WOM sources instead of sources that are closely related (Levy & Gvili, 2015).

Marketing

Armstrong, G. et al. (2009), simply define marketing in their book *Marketing: An Introduction* as “managing profitable customer relationships”. Then, they explain the purpose of marketing as being the creation of value for customers while capturing value in return (Armstrong et al., 2009). Defining it in a broader sense and basically encapsulating the latter statements, marketing would be depicted as “the social and managerial process by which individuals and organizations obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging value with others” (Armstrong et al., 2009). If it was to see this definition from a business context scope, considering the goal of this paper, marketing would be seen as the act of building profitable and value-laden exchange affairs with customers (Armstrong et al., 2009). Henceforth, marketing can be defined, within the context of scope, as the process in which a company attempts to gain value from customers by establishing a powerful relationship with them and by creating value for them in the first place (Armstrong et al., 2009).

Marketing can be executed under a great number of forms, as already mentioned in the introduction. Yet, especially because of the emergence of the internet, marketing has and still is in continuous development. At present, some popular marketing techniques are social media marketing, referral programs, email marketing, point-of-purchase marketing (POP), etc. (Woschnick, 2021). However, for the sake of this research, only email marketing, referral marketing and coupon marketing will be examined in-detail.

Email marketing

Currently, email marketing is undoubtedly one of the most used channels when companies think about promoting their brand or offerings. Moreover, email marketing is considered one of the most powerful marketing channels that exist at today’s date (Jenkins, 2009). This type of marketing technique is seen as a one-of-a-kind communication approach that intertwines both art and science while delivering value into a subscriber’s inbox (Jenkins, 2009). According to Jenkins (2009), email marketing delivers the highest return on investment compared other

marketing techniques, thing that enhances the relevance of the present thesis paper, email marketing being situated at the core of its experiment.

Despite everything great about email marketing, there is also a danger that can arise from this type of marketing. Even though it is easily seen as a widely accepted and used business tool, it sometimes can be overrun by undesirable emails, also known as spam (Pavlov et al., 2008). In addition, it is also proven that the typical view on email marketing from a marketer's angle is that it is generally economical and effective, while from the consumer's point of view it is frequently considered irritating and irrelevant (Hartemo, 2016).

Thus, this must be considered when conclusions will be drawn later in this thesis as biases might arise.

Referral marketing & WOM

Aforementioned, referral marketing can be considered a worthy descendant of WOM. Therefore, in order to understand the power of referral marketing, WOM will be briefly discussed first. Researchers universally support the allegation that WOM has more power on human behavior than alternative marketer-controlled tools (Buttle, 1998). Arndt (1967), which was one of the first researchers to scrutinize the effect of WOM towards consumer behavior described it as the verbal, person-to-person communication between receiver and communicator concerning a brand, product or service, without the receiver perceiving it as commercial.

To this extent, most of the companies around the globe that seek brand awareness have as main goal to make people talk about their brand or products. That is one of the main reasons why referral marketing emerged, in fact. What better way to incentivize people to talk about a brand or product than actually rewarding them for doing so? Practically, referral marketing is done through WOM and can arguably be called a catalyzed WOM technique, as consumers are incentivized to 'pass on the word', usually through a monetary reward, by the marketer. This leads to the depiction of customer referral programs buttoned-up by Kumar et al. (2010), customer referral programs are WOM initiatives owned by marketers that can inspire current customers to lure friends, family, and business contacts into becoming new customers. Thus, addressing referral marketing as a catalyzed WOM is literally a valid comparison because classic WOM programs are customer initiated, whereas referral programs are marketer directed

(Berman, 2016). Furthermore, marketers seem to rather opt for referral marketing rather than WOM considering that they have more power over the message framing and so, in encouraging referrals (Berman, 2016).

Nevertheless, it is vital that a company has databases to work with for successfully applying referral marketing (Berman, 2016). Also, it is worth mentioning that the efficiency of referral programs differs from one firm to another (Berman, 2016). It has been shown that referral marketing works best for firms selling high-risk goods, small firms with small marketing budget, and for firms that are not able to get to possible niche clients with classical ways of promotion (Berman, 2016). Hereby, it seems that applying this sort of strategy for TOOD will most probably turn out as efficient.

Coupon marketing

Being one of the most renown and oldest forms of marketing, coupon marketing might just be one of the most practical marketing approaches, still enjoying a great amount of popularity nowadays. There are three alternatives out of which a marketer can choose when formulating a coupon: cents-off, percentage-off and reduced price (Yin & Dubinsky, 2004). Yin & Dubinsky (2004) have recommended the following after reviewing when and for what should a coupon be framed in the above presented approaches: cents-off or reduced price coupons should be used for high-priced products as they will appear more substantial to consumers, while percentage-off should be used for low-priced products as it will appear to provide a greater value.

As straightforward as it is, a coupon's main appeal is the price discount offered to the customer (Babakus et al., 1988). However, there are seemingly three drivers that have an impact on the usage of coupons (Babakus et al., 1988). These are price/saving, time/effort, and pride/self-satisfaction (Babakus et al., 1988).

The primary driver that makes consumers use a coupon is plainly the price reduction (Babakus et al., 1988). So, those individuals who consider pricing and want to save money while making a purchase, should be the ones using coupons (Babakus et al., 1988).

Time and effort represent a drawback when talking about coupon usage. Whilst saving positively motivates coupon usage, the time and effort that one needs to put into finding and

redeeming the right coupons comes out as an impediment (Babakus et al., 1988). Consequently, those that consider their time as a more valuable asset should be less incentivized to use coupons (Babakus et al., 1988).

Lastly, it is suggested that pride and self-satisfaction are great drivers of coupon usage. There is data that proves that individuals respond more to coupons than to simple price reductions (Babakus et al., 1988). Receiving coupons as a result of being subscribed to a certain emailing list, for example, consumer satisfaction will increase given the fact that they receive something that not everybody else would have access to.

Framing effect

It is no secret that the most common things can have different meanings from one person to another, for example, usual expressions of probability (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Even quantitative expressions (e.g.: likely, frequent, etc.), which one might consider, at first sight, as being part of an exact reasoning and thus, there might be no debate upon them, can be interpreted in different manners from individual to individual (Kong et al., 1986). This adversity in communication has the effects of framing at its core, “the effect on decision making of the description of acts, contingencies, and outcomes” (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Moreover, Malenka et al. (1993) concluded that by framing risks and benefits into a certain context, people’s (more specifically physicians and patients) clinical decision-making process appears to be altered. Along these lines, it can be stated that framing represents a big driver of how individuals perceive a particular message.

Diving a bit deeper into the subject at hand, Li & Ling (2015) define the framing effect as the understanding and assessment of humans’ different behaviors when facing a multiple-choice situation that essentially expresses the same thing. In this sense, the complexity of influences of psychological determinants during the decision-making process of consumers while shopping was demonstrated by scholars (Li & Ling, 2015). For example, Levin et al. (1998) stipulated that framing provides a context in which effects can be both cognitive and motivational. This signifies that framing can eventually determine what is encoded as positive and negative within that certain context (Levin et al., 1998).

Levin et al. (1998) made three distinctions that are likely to influence framing effects: (1) what is framed, (2) what is affected, and (3) how the framing effect is measured. All of these have,

to a great extent, the possibility to affect the effects of framing (Levin et al., 1998). It was decided that the outcomes enclosed by each framing type are substantially consistent (Levin et al., 1998).

By the same token, Jin et al., (2017) measure, in the context of online shopping, the event-related potentials (or ERPs) related to the direct examination of attribute framing's role in information processing and decision-making. The behavioral results attest that individuals with a heightened intention to purchase are quicker in reacting under the positive framing condition compared to the negative framing condition (Jin et al., 2017). The results elevated by the ERPs showed that negative framing messages seem to have attracted a greater span of attention onto the incipient point of rapid automatic processing, compared to positive framing messages (Jin et al., 2017). This resulted in lifted cognitive conflict and an arduous decision-making process (Jin et al., 2017). In addition, messages framed positively permitted customers to gain a better future perception on the performance of products and organize the products at hand with regards to a higher evaluation at the late cognitive processing stage of interpretation, compared to messages framed negatively (Jin et al., 2017).

Monetary reward

Monetary rewards undoubtedly represent a great driver of customer's motivation. For example, casual or fast-food restaurant operators are suggested to employ "immediate, necessary, and monetary rewards as opposed to points-system, luxury, and non-monetary rewards" (Jang & Mattila, 2005). Monetary rewards seem to be more convenient to redeem and they also offer more flexibility, so this is why customers often prefer it (Jang & Mattila, 2005).

Also, there is data reported in a survey of empirical research papers on the correlation of the effects related to individual monetary rewards describing that there is a declining tendency for the error variance of observations around the predicted optimal level when monetary rewards are increased (Smith & Walker, 1993). This means that when the value of a monetary reward is increased, then the outcome for which this action was executed can be predicted without great margin of error.

Yet, in particular scenarios customers might prefer other rewards in exchange for their loyalty. Even though customers typically prefer monetary rewards rather than in-kind rewards due to the greater economic advantage of monetary rewards, it seems that the superior social costs

linked to cash cancel out this advantage and even lower one's motivation for choosing money when the proposal is improper (Jin & Huang, 2014). Jin & Huang (2014) conclude through their four experiments that, compared to in-kind rewards, monetary rewards prevail less referral generation and acceptance, particularly when the brands that are recommended are not strong and the recognized social costs mediate the bilateral effect of the reward type and brand strength (Jin & Huang, 2014). In addition, Jin & Huang (2014) state that if the economic benefit is increased or the social costs are decreased when connected to monetary rewards, the effectiveness of monetary rewards as incentives will be restored. Also, monetary and in-kind rewards proportionately thrive if the reward is large enough, and they do even better when both the one that refers and the one that gets referred are remunerated (Jin & Huang, 2014).

Social effect

This subsection describes one of the most critical concepts to be understood so that one may get the fullest out of this research paper but, unfortunately, it is also one of the most underdebated topics by researchers. Maas & Liket (2011) explained that social impact assessment mechanisms differ on multiple dimensions such as purpose, time frame, orientation, length of time frame, perspective and approach.

Also, the social effect is increasingly used by businesses at present-day, some in pursuance of benefiting the society, some interested in gaining brand awareness and revenue through marketing. This technique stems from the so-called social marketing, which uses marketing principles to advocate voluntary behavior shifts for the benefit of individuals and/or society (Wymer et al., 2006).

Shang et al. (2010) concluded that, ostensibly, by complying with a social marketing approach and consumer beliefs having in scope sponsoring organizations, one can drive the way in which the supposed marketing message is composed. Hence, when the marketer formulates the desired message, framing it socially, it can have a great impact upon the receiver.

Part conclusion

Overall, the above-considered research papers create elementary lectures out of which one can easily gain basic knowledge about the main topic of this paper, the impact of marketing email messages on individuals' perception. Furthermore, these create core expertise for one to eventually be able to comprehend the different ways in which these messages can be interpreted

in terms of monetary and social effect. However, a gap in the literature was identified while researching: there is a clear lack of relevant literature on what effects do social messages produce in marketing communications and there are almost no academic papers that contrast how individuals respond when they are confronted with monetary versus social impact messages. This paper aims to close these gaps by tackling this subject of great relevance for today's world.

Hypothesis Development

This section will explain how this paper's hypotheses have been developed, presenting the underlying knowledge that has driven the study of these.

One with the emergence of the internet and, implicitly, the scaling of digital social networks and the usefulness of WOM-based product diffusion, companies noticed the prominence of using referral programs to expand their business (Jung et al., 2020). This latter technique bolsters already existing customers to engage their social networks through incentive-laden call-to-actions (CTA), familiarize them with a certain product, and has as main goal to influence their friends' purchase decisions (Jung et al., 2020). Simply put, techniques such as referral marketing aim to stimulate organic WOM referrals using monetary incentives (Jung et al., 2020). However, it might be that financial benefits are not necessarily the only way of incentivizing individuals towards completing referrals. Already mentioned into the introduction section, Saxe & Haushofer (2008) stated that positive social feedback and social status activate similar brain stimuli as monetary rewards.

Moreover, Jung et al. (2020) stress out that referrals also offer intrinsic motivation for the one that refers, besides the distinguishable extrinsic motivation that is financially triggered, as the desire to share his/her delight for a product or service. Henceforth, adding an extra intrinsic motivation as helping the society in which one lives, would probably mean that individuals will be more incentivized to refer when encountering a socially activated referral email. Therefore, it can be hypothesized:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals will likely have a positive reaction when confronted with a referral marketing email, and more likely to actually refer a friend when they are confronted with a message that is socially framed compared to one that is financially framed.

Also, there is data reported in a survey of empirical research papers on the correlation of the effects related to individual monetary rewards describing that there is a declining tendency for the error variance of observations around the predicted optimal level when monetary rewards are increased (Smith & Walker, 1993). This means that when the value of a monetary reward is increased, then the outcome for which this action was executed can be predicted without great margin of error.

As Jang & Mattila (2005) express within their research paper on the type of rewards usually preferred by customers, monetary rewards that can be offered in a timely fashion and that are necessary for the customer have a positive result for casual or fast-food restaurants.

Nevertheless, Smith & Walker (1993) came to the conclusion that if the value of a certain monetary award rises for an individual, then it can be positively correlated with a smaller error variance around the predicted optimal level. Meaning, thus, that when a customer gets a significantly valuable coupon code in financial terms, that customer should be incentivized to use that coupon code to place an order. Thus, it is hypothesized:

Hypothesis 2: Individuals will likely have a positive reaction when confronted with a coupon marketing email, and more likely to actually place an order using the coupon when they are confronted with a message that is financially framed compared to one that is socially framed.

As social marketing is increasingly used by companies as it is advocating voluntary behavior and shifting for the benefit of individuals and/or society (Wymer et al., 2006), it can also be easily used for the benefit of the company. Henceforth, it would be enticing to see how possible customers of a catering company see this marketing approach.

Shang et al. (2010) settled that one can influence the receiver of a social marketing message when “complying with a social marketing program and consumer attitudes towards sponsoring organization.” This offers understanding as to the fact that formulating a marketing email message incentivizing the social effect may have the power of positively impacting the customers’ response to the email. Along these lines, especially that there is a gap within this research area, it can be hypothesized:

Hypothesis 3: Marketing email messages, as messages from a catering company, have positive results when they are framed socially.

Study 1

The aim of Study 1 is to test H₁, namely, evaluating whether individuals, considered potential clients of a catering company, will have a positive reaction when confronted with a referral marketing email. Moreover, H₁ will examine if a socially framed message has more incentive on a customer's intention to refer a friend than a financially framed one. As implied in the Hypothesis Development section, (1) individuals seem to store the positive social feedback and social status and the monetary awards in the same brain section, (2) referrals offer both intrinsic (sharing the great experience related to a product or service) and extrinsic motivation (financial benefits) to a customer, and (3) adding an intrinsic motivator may perhaps tilt the balance towards a socially framed email message rather than a financially framed one.

Method

To test the first hypothesis of this paper, two-sample unpaired T-tests were repeatedly done to compare the feelings, reactions, and perceptions of the respondents in relation with the two different email marketing messages.

Design and Procedures: For the first hypothesis there were two separate surveys created via Qualtrics surveys. Both encapsulated pictures of an email marketing message that encouraged customers to refer a friend. One email contained text framed socially, having as scope helping a cause (more specifically children in need) through a charitable foundation, while the other email was created having a monetary message in mind. Both emails were designed specifically for the sake of this thesis.

The email framed socially was designed having both the catering company's and the charitable foundation's logos in the header. The portion of text that refers to act socially, such as "have an impact on the society in which you live" or "we will donate a food menu to children in need for each completed referral", is written in bold. Also, the email was created having a CTA button and CTA messages so that it will have a bigger impact upon the reader (see Appendix 1).

The email framed financially was designed having just the catering company's logo in the header. The selection of text that sets emphasis on the monetary benefit, such as "earn 8 RON¹

¹ RON = Romanian Leu

for each referral completed” is written in bold. This email was also created having a CTA button and CTA messages for a more extensive impact upon the reader (see Appendix 2).

The surveys were equally distributed on social media platforms (i.e.: LinkedIn, Facebook and WhatsApp), people being asked to complete one or the other. Thus, for this hypothesis, two treatment groups were randomly created, the survey answers being gathered in the course of three weeks.

The surveys were split into two sections: demographics and questions related to the respondent’s feelings and behavior related to the respective email message. Questions about demographics are related to age, gender, and education. Within the second section there has been added a ‘mark statement’ to check the validity of the respondents’ answer. This part is vital to check the authenticity of the respondent’s answers. If the answer to the mark statement was incorrectly selected from the multiple-choice alternatives by any of the respondents, the surveys were considered invalid and were not taken into consideration during this research.

The demographical information of the survey respondents can be found in Appendix 5 & 6.

Eventually, after the survey sessions ended, raw data had to be processed. Regarding demographics, besides age that already had numeric values, the answers were numbered from 0 to 3 (first to last) for the questions that had 4 multiple-choice answers and 0 to 4 (first to last) for the questions that had 5 multiple-choice answers. For the processing of the survey section where answers were scaled from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”, these were numbered from 1 to 7 (from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”). In this way, data could be computed. The mean, standard deviation, variance, N-value (sample size), P-value, T-value, the standard error of difference (SE) and degrees of freedom (DF) of each question were calculated.

Measures: The items created to measure the relevance of the two messages at hand for the survey participants were “This email appears relevant to me.” and “This email aligns with my beliefs.”. For measuring the respondents’ feelings when reading the, the following items were used: “My first thought was a positive one when seeing this email.” and “What feelings did this email convey to you? Rate your emotions using the star interaction below.”.

The following statements were used to verify the participants’ perception with regards to the emails’ attractiveness: “The one thing that stuck with me after reading this email were the

logos.”, “The one thing that stuck with me after reading this email was the message.”, “The one thing that stuck with me after reading this email was the marketing technique.”, “The one thing that stuck with me after reading this email was the format of the email.”. The statements “I am incentivised to refer a friend because, by doing so, I will help a cause.” and “I believe that if the catering company would offer me the possibility to donate directly to the Save the Children foundation I would be more incentivised to refer a friend.” were designed to directly evaluate the impact that the social framing effect has upon potential clients of the catering company. More than that, “I think that this email's marketing purpose worked.” and “I would have used the same approach if I were in the marketer's position.” were used to check the respondents’ perception on the efficiency of the emails. On the other hand, “I am incentivised to refer a friend because, by doing so, I will earn 8 RON for each completed referral.” and “I believe that if the catering company would offer a better-looking email I would be more incentivised to refer a friend.” were designed to directly evaluate the impact that the financial framing effect has upon the clients of the catering company. Last but not least, the open-ended question “Is there something you would think as improvable in this email? What is that?” was meant to let the participants express themselves using their own words with regards to the respective message they got.

For manipulation checks, the statements “I think that the email is designed for humanitarian activities.” and “I think that the email is designed for the catering company’s profit.” were evaluated to check the surveyors’ perceptions related to the goal of the emails.

In order to measure the answers of the respondents properly, multiple-choice Disagree-Agree answers were provided. The Disagree-Agree multiple-choice answers were similar to a 7-point Likert scale, as the answers were scaled from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”. Conjointly, a half-step star interaction with five scale points was used for one of the survey questions.

Findings and Discussion

Randomization Check: Multiple two-sample T-test were run to verify the correct randomization of the participants across the two treatment groups in relation to their demographics. There were no statistically significant differences between the two for participants’ age ($t(86) = 0.0777, p > 0.9$), gender ($t(86) = 0.2705, p > 0.75$) or education

($t(86) = 1.2154, p > 0.2$). Thusforth, the randomization of this thesis paper's experiment is ensured.

Manipulation Check: The respondents that were assigned to complete the survey with the socially framed message ($M = 5.2195, SD = 1.6895; M = 4.3415, SD = 1.6321$) and those who completed the one with the financially framed message ($M = 2.878, SD = 1.5173; M = 5.3902, SD = 1.3771$) understood what they were meant for, their respective goal ($t(80) = 6.6024, p < 0.0001; t(80) = 3.1445, p < 0.0025$). Hence, as the results suggest, successful manipulation is confirmed.

Results: In order to process the survey answers multiple two-sample T-tests were run to analyze and compare the participants' feelings, perceptions, and reactions to the socially framed versus financially framed message. The participants that went through the email that was framed socially ($M = 5.1463, SD = 1.5705$) had a more positive feeling when reading ($t(84) = 2.6013, P < 0.015$) than the ones that went through the email that was framed financially ($M = 4.1778, SD = 1.8534$). The respondents that encountered the socially framed message ($M = 4.9535, SD = 1.6559; M = 5.45, SD = 1.0943$) perceived the message as more relevant to them ($t(86) = 1.4379, p < 0.2; t(84) = 3.9873, p < 0.0015$) than those who encountered the financially framed one ($M = 4.4, SD = 1.9368; M = 4.2222, SD = 1,6718$).

The respondents that had to deal with the socially framed message ($M = 4.2439, SD = 1.8712; M = 5.0732, SD = 1.5204; M = 4,7, SD = 1.5684; M = 4,3, SD = 1.8601$) perceived the message as more attractive almost every time ($t(80) = 1.6904, p < 0.095; t(80) = 3.4380, p < 0.001; t(79) = 3.0879, p < 0.003; t(79) = 1.9465, p < 0.06$) than those who encountered the financially framed one ($M = 4.9268, SD = 1.786; M = 3.878, SD = 1.6259; M = 3.5122, SD = 1.8757; M = 3.5122, SD = 1.7823$).

The individuals that undergone the message framed with a social incentive ($M = 5.2195, SD = 1.4735$) apparently have a greater incentive to act upon that certain message ($t(80) = 3.1445, p < 0.0025$) than individuals that undergone the message framed with a monetary incentive ($M = 4.2439, SD = 2.0216$). Also, the ones that got the socially framed marketing email ($M = 4.8293, SD = 1.6321$) will have a higher incentive to act upon the email when proposed with an improved solution ($t(80) = 2.1492, p < 0.035$) than the ones that got the financially framed email ($M = 4.0488, SD = 1.7523$).

Also, the respondents that were submitted to the socially framed message ($M = 4.8293$, $SD = 1.8987$; $M = 4.2439$, $SD = 1.7219$) perceived the message as more efficient ($t(80) = 1.3333$, $p < 0.19$; $t(80) = 0.1864$, $p < 0.86$) than those who encountered the financially framed one ($M = 4.2927$, $SD = 1.7425$; $M = 4.1707$, $SD = 1.8333$).

Discussion: Study 1 shows that the receivers' reaction is not necessarily positively impacted by referral marketing emails, in general. It will always depend on several aspects, but most importantly, framing seems to have a great impact upon how receivers perceive a referral marketing email. Henceforth, Study 1 demonstrates that when framing a referral marketing email in a social manner, the customer will be more likely to act upon it than to a referral marketing email framed in a financial manner.

Practically, private businesses, but especially catering companies, can benefit from this study by framing their referral marketing emails differently than just simply offering a monetary reward. By framing the email message in such manner that the readers of that email will feel empowered if they act upon it, will certainly increase the email's efficiency.

Study 2

The objective of Study 2 is testing H₂, namely, judging whether individuals, considered potential clients of a catering company, will react positively when confronted with a coupon marketing email. Moreover, H₂ will determine if a socially framed message has more incentive on a customer's intention to claim a coupon than a financially framed one. As implied in the Hypothesis Development section, (1) individuals seem to store the positive social feedback and social status and the monetary awards in the same brain section, (2) coupons mainly awake extrinsic motivation (financial benefits) to a customer, but it would be utmost peculiar to see if there is genuinely more incentive to claim a coupon when a social frame is attached to the message.

Method

Identically as in Study 1, for the testing of the second hypothesis of this thesis, two-sample unpaired T-tests were repeatedly done to compare the feelings, reactions, and perceptions of the respondents in relation with the two different email marketing messages.

Design and Procedures: Similar to Study 1, two separate surveys were created via Qualtrics surveys for the second hypothesis. Both showed pictures of an email marketing message that has as goal incentivizing customers to claim a coupon. One of the emails contained socially framed text, having as scope helping a cause (more specifically children in need) through a charitable foundation, while the other was put together having a monetary frame. Both emails were designed specifically for the sake of this thesis.

Same as before, the email framed socially was designed having both the catering company's and the charitable foundation's logos in the header. The portion of text that refers to act socially, such as "have an impact on the society in which you live" or "we will donate a food menu to children in need for each order placed using this coupon", is written in bold. Again, the email was created having a CTA button and CTA messages (see Appendix 7).

Once more, the email framed financially was designed having just the catering company's logo in the header. The selection of text that highlights monetary benefit, such as "you just won a discount" or "win 8 RON on your next order" is written in bold. This email was also created having a CTA button and CTA messages (see Appendix 4).

The survey distribution process remains unchanged, they were equally distributed on social media platforms (i.e.: LinkedIn, Facebook and WhatsApp) and people were asked to complete one or the other. Therefore, two treatment groups were randomly created for this hypothesis and the survey answers have been gathered in the course of three weeks.

Once again, the surveys were divided in two parts: demographics and questions about the respondent's feelings and behavior related to the respective email message. Questions about demographics are related to age, gender, and education. For the second section there has been added a 'mark statement' to check the validity of the respondents' answer and the same rule as in Study 1 was kept concerning this.

The demographical information of this survey's respondents can be found in Appendix 7 & 8.

Identically as in Study 1, after the survey sessions ended, raw data was processed, and the same numbering rule was used for questions that didn't have numbers as multiple-choice answers. Thus, the mean, standard deviation, variance, N-value (sample size), P-value, T-value, the standard error of difference (SE) and degrees of freedom (DF) of each question were computed.

Measures: The items created to measure the relevance, respondents' feelings when reading, emails' attractiveness, respondents' perception on the efficiency of the emails stay the same.

The statements "I am incentivized to claim my coupon when placing an order because, by doing so, I will help a cause." and "I believe that if the catering company would offer me the possibility to donate directly to the Save the Children foundation I would be more incentivised to claim my coupon." were designed to directly evaluate the impact that the social framing effect has upon potential clients of the catering company. On the other hand, "I am incentivised to claim my coupon because, by doing so, I will earn 8 RON on my next order." and "I believe that if the catering company would offer a better-looking email I would be more incentivised to place an order using the coupon." were designed to directly evaluate the impact that the financial framing effect has upon the clients of the catering company. Finally, mirroring Study 1, the open-ended question "Is there something you would think as improvable in this email? What is that?" offered the participants the possibility to give their thoughts on the respective message they got.

For manipulation checks, the statement remains unchanged and it was evaluated to check the respondents' perceptions related to the goal of the emails.

Again, as in Study 1, to measure the answers of the respondents, multiple-choice Disagree-Agree answers were provided. Conjointly, a half-step star interaction with five scale points was used for one of the surveys' questions.

Findings and Discussion

Randomization Check: Exactly the same as in Study 1, multiple two-sample T-test were run to verify the correct randomization of the participants across the two treatment groups in relation to their demographics. There were statistically significant differences between the two for participants' age ($t(91) = 2.2929$, $p < 0.025$) and gender ($t(91) = 3.3944$, $p < 0.0011$), but not for education ($t(91) = 1.2987$, $p > 0.2$). Thusforth, the randomization of this thesis paper's second experiment could not be achieved, as the difference is considered to be very statistically significant with respect to age and gender. This will be considered later when describing the limitations of this research.

Manipulation Check: The respondents that were assigned to complete the survey with the socially framed message ($M = 5.3415$, $SD = 1.5712$; $M = 4.1463$, $SD = 1.6012$) and those who completed the one with the financially framed message ($M = 2.9778$, $SD = 1.468$; $M = 5.6957$, $SD = 1.1396$) understood what they were meant for, their respective goal ($t(84) = 7.2121$, $p < 0.0001$; $t(85) = 5.2418$, $p < 0.0001$). Hence, as the results suggest, successful manipulation is confirmed.

Results: As in Study 1, processing the survey answers was done running multiple two-sample T-tests to analyze and compare the participants' feelings, perceptions, and reactions to the socially framed versus financially framed message. The participants that went through the email that was framed socially ($M = 5.6098$, $SD = 1.463$) had a more positive feeling when reading ($t(86) = 2.1581$, $P < 0.035$) than the ones that went through the email that was framed financially ($M = 4.8723$, $SD = 1.7088$). Moreover, the respondents that encountered the socially framed message ($M = 5.8372$, $SD = 0.8874$; $M = 5.6667$, $SD = 1.0389$) perceived the message as more relevant to them ($t(91) = 4.1262$, $p < 0.0001$; $t(88) = 3.9842$, $p < 0.00015$) than those who encountered the financially framed one ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.889$; $M = 4.5833$, $SD = 1,4696$).

The respondents that had to deal with the socially framed message ($M = 4.5854$, $SD = 1.9378$; $M = 5.5366$, $SD = 1.2513$; $M = 4.5854$, $SD = 1.2489$; $M = 4.0976$, $SD = 1.5743$) perceived the message as more attractive almost every time ($t(86) = 1.0653$, $p < 0.3$; $t(86) = 3.6126$, $p < 0.0006$; $t(86) = 1.5166$, $p < 0.14$; $t(86) = 0.5740$, $p < 0.6$) than those who encountered the financially framed one ($M = 5$, $SD = 1.7135$; $M = 4.3333$, $SD = 1.7834$; $M = 4.0851$, $SD = 1.7604$; $M = 3.9149$, $SD = 1.4117$).

The individuals that undergone the message framed with a social incentive ($M = 6.0488$, $SD = 0.9093$) apparently have a greater incentive to act upon that certain message ($t(85) = 4.2443$, $p < 0.0001$) than individuals that undergone the message framed with a monetary incentive ($M = 4.7826$, $SD = 1.7057$). On the other hand, the ones that got the socially framed marketing email ($M = 4.4878$, $SD = 1.399$) will have a somewhat lower incentive to act upon the email when proposed with an improved solution ($t(85) = 0.6032$, $p < 0.61$) than the ones that got the financially framed email ($M = 4.6957$, $SD = 1.7677$).

Also, the respondents that were submitted to the socially framed message ($M = 5.4146$, $SD = 1.1682$; $M = 4.112$, $SD = 1.4347$) perceived the message as slightly more efficient ($t(85) = 2.9235$, $p < 0.0045$; $t(85) = 0.1689$, $p < 0.87$) than those who encountered the financially framed one ($M = 4.587$, $SD = 1.4382$; $M = 4.0652$, $SD = 1.6733$).

Discussion: Study 2 shows that the receivers' reaction is not necessarily positively impacted by coupon marketing emails, as it was hypothesized, but quite the opposite. Coupon marketing emails may often be seen as spams or annoying, considering that today it is a general practice, and one may get a coupon code maybe even daily. Similar with Study 1, but more interesting to observe is that framing seems to have a great impact upon how receivers perceive a coupon marketing email. In general, one would have thought that coupon marketing is just about getting a discount fast. However, it seems that formulating coupon marketing email messages framed in a specific way, namely having a social incentive, makes a customer want to claim that certain coupon code even more. Henceforth, Study 2 demonstrates that when framing a coupon marketing email in a social manner, the customer will be more likely to act upon it than to a referral marketing email framed in a financial manner.

Private businesses, as catering companies, can gain knowledge from this study by framing their coupon marketing emails differently than just simply offering a monetary reward. By framing

the email message in such manner that the readers of that email will feel empowered if they act upon it, will certainly increase the email's efficiency.

Study 3

The aim of Study 3 is to test H₃, namely, evaluating the general effect that socially framed marketing email messages have upon the potential customers of a catering company.

As described earlier in Wymer et al. (2006), social marketing is verily a current practice, as it uses marketing principles to push voluntary behavior shifts for the benefit of individuals and/or society. What is currently not discussed by literature is that even social marketing has obvious positive effects on society, it can be also used by companies to capitalize. It is to be stressed out that some companies already use this practice to gain brand awareness and recognition. However, the extent to which this practice is an ethical method it is still to be discussed further by researchers.

Additionally, Shang et al. (2010), studied in the Literature Review earlier in this paper, were stating that through compliance with a social marketing procedure and consumers' beliefs while also considering the sponsoring of organizations, the way in which a marketing message is composed can be easily driven. Thus, framing a marketing email message socially should have a great impact upon a customer's behavior.

Last but not least, Study 1 and 2 demonstrate that when socially framing a referral or coupon marketing email, the customer will be more likely to act upon it than to a referral marketing email financially framed.

Given all the literature studied for this paper, but also given the results from Study 1 and Study 2 of this thesis, it can be concluded that by framing marketing email messages, as messages from a catering company, in a social fashion can lead to better marketing results. What's more, it can be assumed that email marketing as a whole relies on how the email is framed. Even though, only just two ways of framing were subject of study within this paper, it could have been observed that how individuals perceive them can be completely peculiar.

General Discussion

Customer perception with regards to email marketing messages heavily relies on the way these are presented. However, the existing research provides fuzzy guidelines regarding this topic. Researchers have already analyzed email marketing, coupon marketing, referral marketing and how these work, but it is notable to mention that there is no clear presentation as to how these can become more effective. All in all, living in a world where people are literally flooded with emails on a daily basis, a marketer must know what to do in order to attract customers towards opening and eventually acting upon their email. This study's goal is to examine this issues and try filling the literature gap, also encouraging further research. The findings resulted from this paper's three studies suggest that (I) consumers are more likely to perceive a socially framed referral marketing email more positively rather than a financially framed one (II) consumers are more likely to perceive a socially framed coupon marketing email more positively rather than a financially framed one (III) overall, consumers are more likely to dismiss a financially beneficial email marketing message and engage with one that makes them feel altruistic, empowered and feeds their social status. Hence, this paper aim to solidifies one knowledge on humans' perception on email marketing messages, especially towards coupon and referral marketing email messages.

Research Implications

The findings of this thesis research paper have three crucial implications for research on email marketing and framing messages. These findings have been discovered by analyzing specific literature and following Study 1, 2 and 3 of this paper.

First, with respect to Study 1 of this paper, individuals, as possible clients of a catering company, are more inclined to act upon a referral marketing email that is socially framed rather than one which is financially framed. This can be supported by Saxe & Haushofer (2008) as they conclude that positive social feedback and social status are typically activated within the same brain section as monetary rewards are. Also, given that Jung et al. (2020) express their idea that referrals offer both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, it appears that adding an extra intrinsic motivation (giving free meals to children in need) genuinely meant that individuals were more incentivized to refer when encountering socially activated referral emails.

Second, even if Babakus et al. (1988) state that the primary driver that makes consumers use a coupon is plainly the price reduction and that individuals who take into consideration pricing and the saving of money while making a purchase will use coupons, Study 2 of this paper showed that there is much more than that. Seemingly, although individuals receive free email coupon codes, they tend to be skeptic to using it because of the fact that nowadays they are used to getting these. As already mentioned, people receive these types of email messages on a daily basis, thus, their interest is not aroused anymore. More than that, they tend to dismiss them and consider them spam emails. Thus, it was proven that when a typical coupon email marketing message is framed socially, the perception of individuals grows into the better.

Third and most important, it was proven by Study 3 of this paper that socially framing an email marketing message, in this case referral email marketing and coupon email marketing, positively affects the reader's perception on the email. This supported by Shang et al. (2010) who suggested that framing a marketing email message socially should have a great impact upon a customer's behavior.

Practical Implications

There are several practical implications that can be considered as following this research.

First, by the above findings, we can state that businesses can benefit from the fruits of the marketing labor if the PR campaigns are focused on the social details of their mass of customers, rather than trying to attract customers by cost-efficient incentives.

Second, the above findings validate the humanity of business-to-customer incentives as being the most efficient, proving that possible future customers can be retained if addressed directly from a social manner, offering a possible profit growth.

Third, although the rational thing to choose in this decisioning would be favoring the financial incentive, the above-validated hypothesis shows that the most important resource of an economy is the human at the center of it.

Fourth, although social incentives showed a higher retain of the general audience, both incentives, when addressed to a future/actual customer have a chance of increasing the interest an individual offers towards a business, proving the importance of a business marketing plan being developed rationally.

Limitations and Future Research

This research paper had a number of limitations which should be addressed later in future research.

First, while gathering survey participants, surveys were evenly shared on social media platforms, people being asked to complete them. This is the reason for which there was no control upon the gender and age of those who completed any of the surveys. A better randomization of survey respondents should be assured either by properly using a surveying tool that could equally spread the participants by age, gender, and education or by personally selecting the respondents more carefully.

Second, the answers for the survey were gathered during the course of three weeks. It is likely that leaving the survey open for more time would increase both the number of respondents and the randomization.

Third, more than half of the survey respondents selected the wrong multiple-choice answer for the 'mark statement' and thus, more than half of the survey responses were regarded as null. Some considered this as a mistake in the survey and have just randomly selected an answer, even though all their other answers may have been valid. Future studies may want using a better 'mark statement' so that people will not consider it a "mistake question".

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[doi:10.1362/0267257041838764](https://doi.org/10.1362/0267257041838764)

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Referral marketing (socially framed message)

2



Hello [subscriber: firstname],

Do you want to **have an impact on the society in which you live?** From now on, together with the Save the Children foundation, we help you do this. Recommend a friend using the link in your customer account and **we will donate a food menu to children in need for each completed referral.**

What does a completed referral mean? The friend you refer must create a new user account using the referral link from your client account. After your friend places the first order on his account you will receive the referral discount code.

Stop wasting time and press the button below to help a child who wants to eat!

IT'S TIME TO ACT!

Thanks for reading. You will hear from us soon!

TOOD Team

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Manage your subscription](#)
contact@tood.ro

Appendix 2 – Referral marketing (financially framed message)



Hello [subscriber:firstname],

Refer a friend using the link in your client account and you will **earn 8 RON for each referral completed.**

What does a completed referral mean? The friend you refer must create a new user account using the referral link from your client account. After your friend places the first order on his account you will receive the referral discount code.

Stop wasting time and click the button below to complete your first referral!

REFER NOW!

Thanks for reading. You will hear from us soon!

TOOD Team

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Manage your subscription](#)

contact@tood.ro

Appendix 3 – Coupon marketing (socially framed message)



Hello [subscriber: firstname],

Do you want to **have an impact on the society in which you live**? From now on, together with the Save the Children foundation, we help you do this. Redeem your coupon using the code **savethechildren** when you place an order and **we will donate a food menu to children in need for each order placed using this coupon.**

Stop wasting time and press the button below to help a child who wants to eat!

IT'S TIME TO ACT!

Thanks for reading. You will hear from us soon!

TOOD Team

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Appendix 4 – Coupon marketing (financially framed message)



Salutare [subscriber:firstname],

Because you are our client, we want to reward you, so ... congratulations, **you just won a discount!** Claim your coupon now and you will **win 8 RON on your next order!**

Don't waste any more time, press the button below and place an order using the code *tood8!*

Order now!

Thanks for reading. You will hear from us soon!

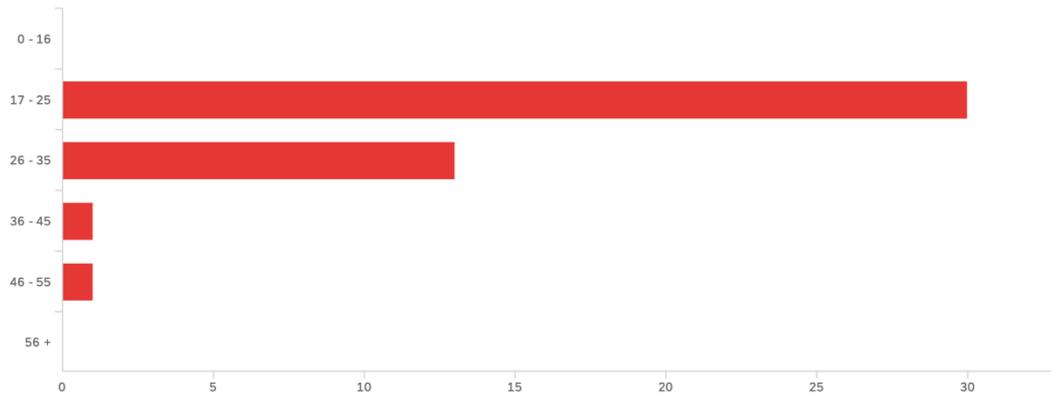
TOOD Team

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Manage your subscription](#)

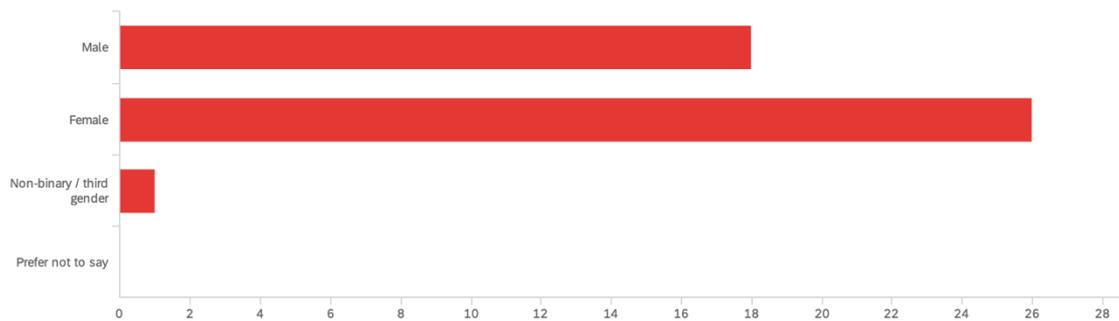
contact@tood.ro

Appendix 5 – Demographics for the financially framed referral email marketing message

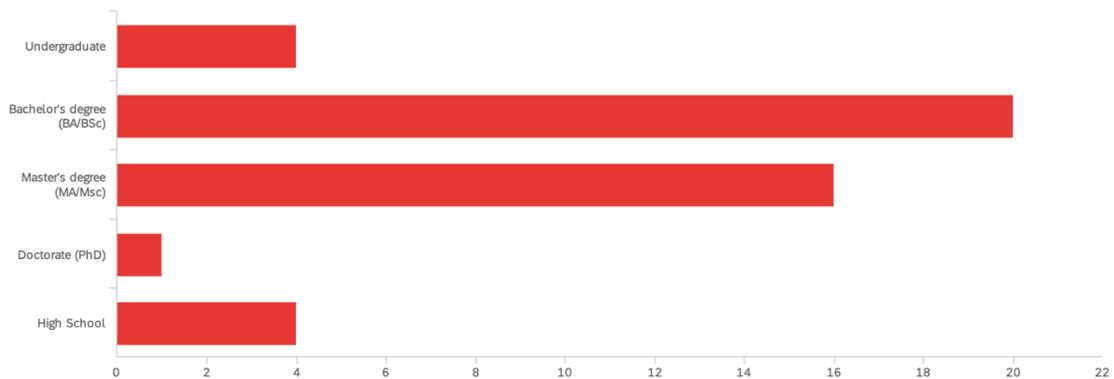
Age - How old are you?



Gender - What is your gender?

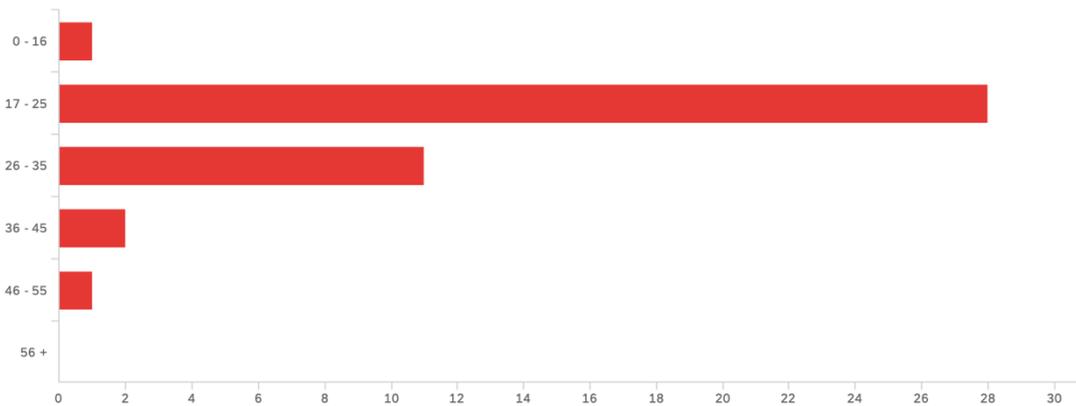


Education - What is your level of education?

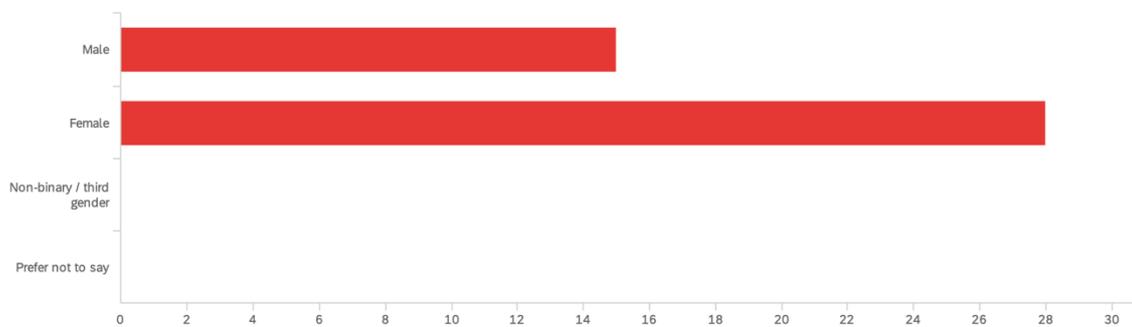


Appendix 6 – Demographics for the socially framed referral email marketing message

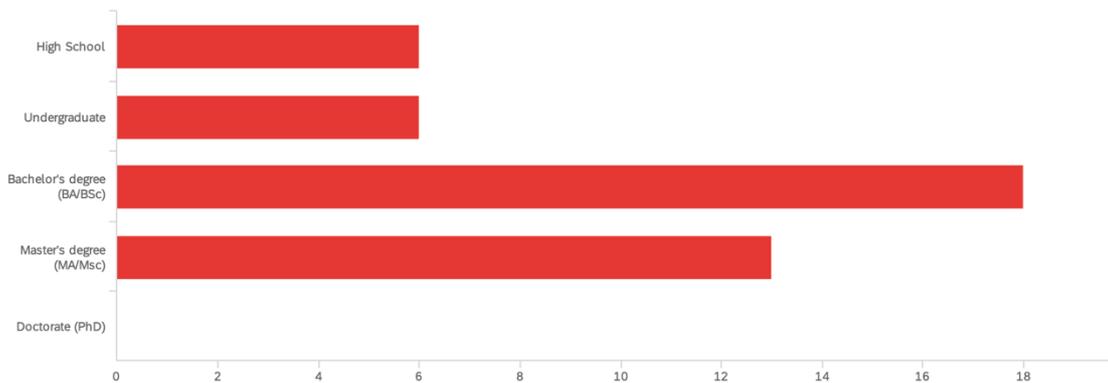
Age - How old are you?



Gender - What is your gender?

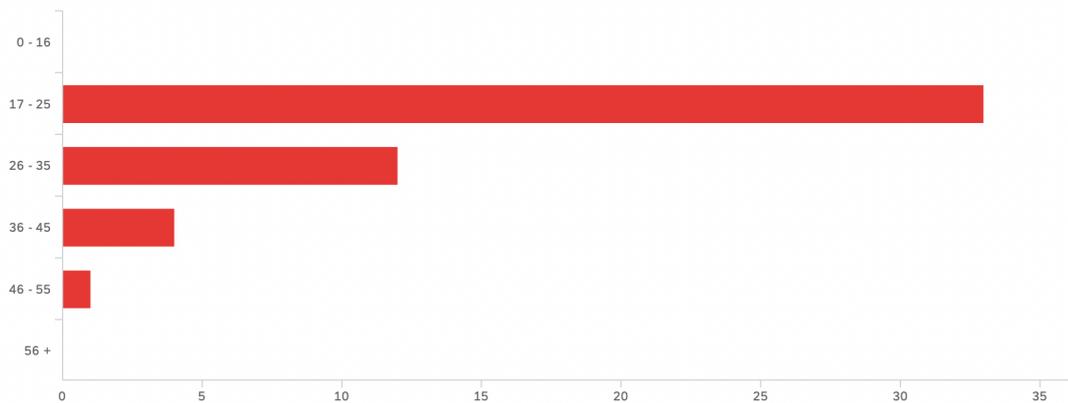


Q103 - What is your level of education?

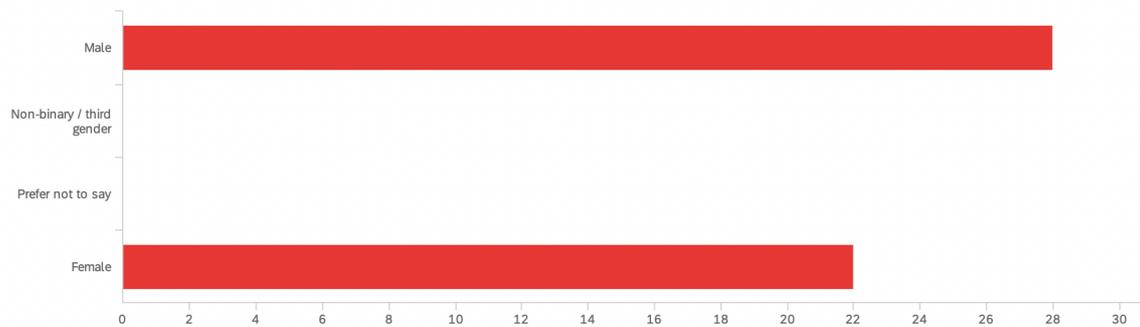


Appendix 7 – Demographics for the financially framed coupon email marketing message

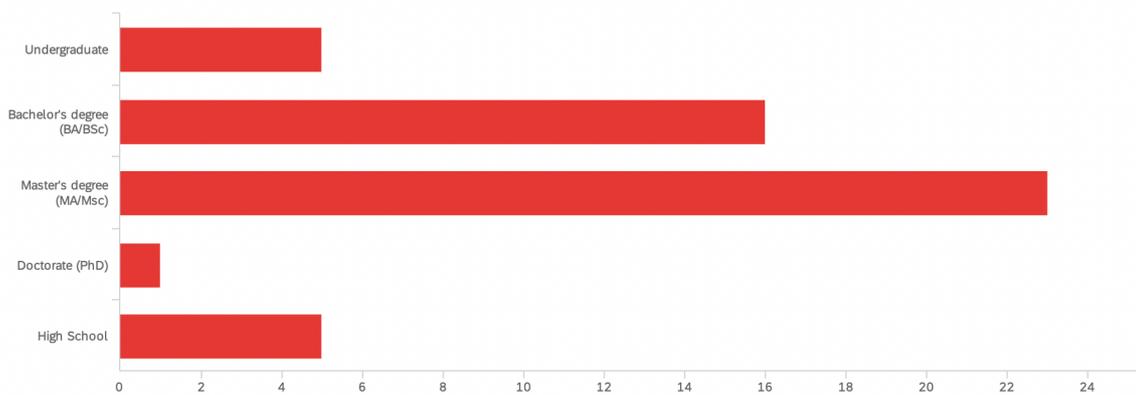
Age - How old are you?



Q99 - What is your gender?

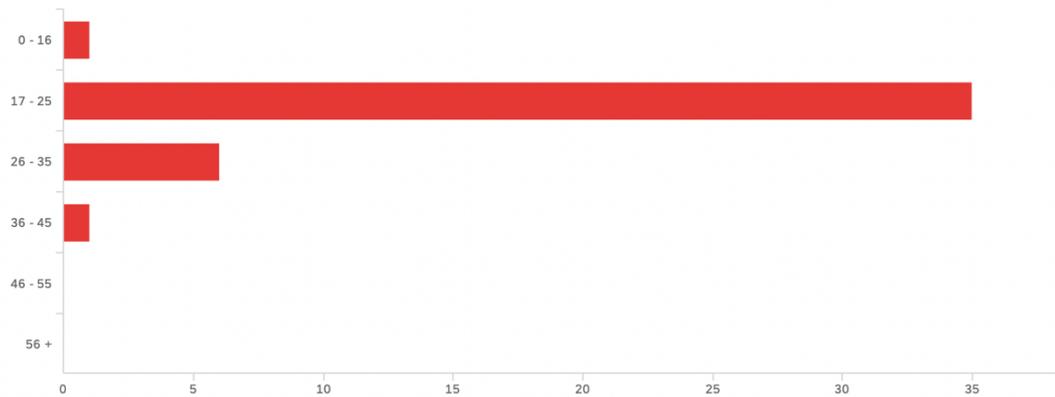


Education - What is your level of education?

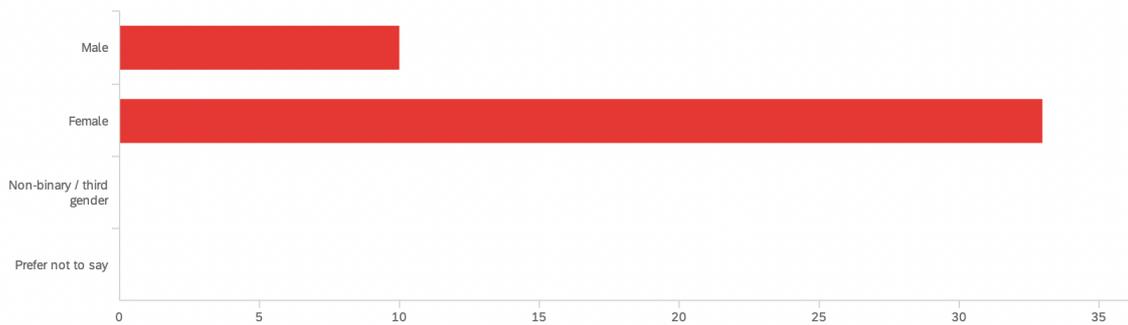


Appendix 8 – Demographics for the socially framed coupon email marketing message

Age - How old are you?



Gender - What is your gender?



Education - What is your level of education?

