

The Effect of Viral Marketing on Consumer Behaviour: A Review of Literature and Conceptual Model Development

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Abstract

This review synthesizes current research on viral marketing through social media, analyzing how different message content types influence purchase intentions, with particular attention to research gaps in the Indian context. The review of literature is done exploring researches in mostly in the last 10 years. The main keywords used to find the articles are - viral marketing and consumer behaviour/attitude/purchase intentions, and effect of viral marketing on consumer behaviour /attitude/purchase intentions. The research papers were searched on Google Scholar, Science Direct and Scopus Databases. The relevant research papers were downloaded, if available, and analysed using content analysis. The analysis reveals that viral marketing leverages social networks and digital platforms to spread messages rapidly, and has a clear and significant impact on consumer behaviour. It influences attitudes, purchase intentions, brand recognition, trust, credibility and even transforms consumers from passive recipients to active participants in marketing ecosystems. While viral marketing has been extensively studied globally, significant knowledge gaps exist regarding its specific applications and effectiveness within India's unique ecosystem. It was found that the effect of five viral marketing characteristics – informativeness, entertainment, customisation, interactivity and EWOM on purchase intentions is understudied in India. This study explores the impact of these viral marketing messages and develop a conceptual model employing Theory of Reasoned Action. The conceptual model has implications for marketers and future researches can test the conceptual model empirically to produce the evidences in Indian context.

Keywords: Viral Marketing, Consumer Behaviour, Attitude, Purchase Intention, Social Media and Theory of Reasoned Action.

1. Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of digital marketing, viral marketing has emerged as a powerful tool that transcends traditional boundaries of consumer reach and engagement. Viral marketing can be defined as a business strategy that utilizes existing social networks to promote products or services, primarily through various social media platforms (Wikipedia, 2023). As Dan Zarella, a social media scientist, describes it, viral marketing is a marketing strategy where marketers create campaigns designed to be spontaneously shared with friends (Rupali, 2022). The name itself draws a parallel to how information spreads from one person to another, similar to the transmission pattern of a virus (Wikipedia, 2023). This organic diffusion of marketing content represents a significant shift from traditional marketing approaches, offering businesses new avenues to connect with potential consumers.

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed the marketing ecosystem in India, creating fertile ground for viral marketing campaigns. With the world's second-largest internet user base and rapidly increasing smartphone penetration, India presents a unique environment where traditional consumer behavior intersects with emerging digital trends. The exponential growth of social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and more recently, short-video platforms like TikTok, has created unprecedented opportunities for marketers to leverage viral content strategies (Directive Consulting, 2024). This digital transformation has coincided with India's evolving consumer landscape, characterized by a young demographic, increasing disposable incomes, and growing digital literacy.

Viral marketing operates on the principle of exponential growth in message recipients (Kagan, 2024). Unlike traditional marketing where communication flows unidirectionally from businesses to consumers, viral marketing harnesses the power of consumer-to-consumer transmission. This approach significantly amplifies reach while potentially reducing marketing costs. The Internet and social media have dramatically increased the velocity and volume of viral messages through mechanisms such

as shares, likes, and forwards (Kagan, 2024). What distinguishes viral marketing is that while it may originate from an identified sponsor, businesses typically do not pay for its distribution beyond the initial launch (Wikipedia, 2023).

Understanding the impact of viral marketing on consumer behavior is crucial for businesses operating in the competitive Indian market. Research indicates that viral marketing creates awareness among customers about products or services, though its direct impact on purchasing decisions remains complex (Rupalee, 2022). Studies have shown that consumers are increasingly relying on peer recommendations and user-generated content when making purchase decisions, making viral marketing a potentially powerful influencer of consumer behavior (Rupalee, 2022). The effectiveness of viral marketing is particularly notable when it aligns with India's collectivistic cultural values and the importance placed on social validation.

However, viral marketing in the Indian context faces unique challenges including digital divides, linguistic diversity, cultural sensitivities, and concerns regarding data privacy and security (Randt, 2017). The study by Rupalee (2022) highlights that while consumers are aware of the benefits of viral marketing, there exists apprehension regarding privacy issues that marketers need to address through appropriate policies (Rupalee, 2022).

This review article aims to comprehensively examine the effects of viral marketing on consumer behavior in India, analyzing both opportunities and challenges. It will explore various viral marketing strategies, their implementation in different sectors, and their measurable impacts on consumer awareness, engagement, and purchasing behavior. By synthesizing existing research and identifying gaps in the literature, this review seeks to provide valuable insights for marketers, researchers, and policymakers navigating the dynamic landscape of viral marketing in India.

2. Viral Marketing and Consumer Behaviour

Viral marketing, leverages social networks and digital platforms to spread messages rapidly, has a clear and significant impact on consumer behavior. It influences attitudes, purchase intentions, brand recognition, and even transforms consumers from passive recipients to active participants in marketing ecosystems.

Viral marketing increases consumers' purchase intentions by leveraging social influence, source credibility, and social interaction on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. These factors shape attitudes and subjective norms, which in turn drive purchase decisions (Gunawan & Huarng, 2015; Gu, 2025; Wulansari et al., 2024). Viral marketing directly affects consumer behavior, which then mediates and enhances the likelihood of making a purchase (Wulansari et al., 2024; Habibie et al., 2024).

Viral marketing boosts brand awareness and trust, making consumers more likely to favour and choose those brands. Enhanced brand awareness also facilitates further information sharing, creating a positive feedback loop (Gu, 2025; Phelps et al., 2004; Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). Effective viral marketing strategies on social media significantly improve both brand recognition and brand preference, especially among younger consumers (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021).

Viral marketing, especially when combined with influencer transforms consumers from passive observers to active participants—such as resellers, affiliates, and co-creators—within digital marketing ecosystems (Rachmad et al., 2024). This shift is supported by the interactive nature of social platforms, which encourages consumers to share, refer, and engage with marketing content (Gu, 2025; Pescher et al., 2014; Bruyn & Lilien, 2008; Rachmad et al., 2024).

The effectiveness of viral marketing depends on factors like message entertainment value, social tie strength, and the perceived ease of use of platforms. These factors influence whether consumers read, share, or act on viral messages (Gu, 2025; Pescher et al., 2014; Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). Generational differences and the credibility of influencers can moderate how consumers respond to viral marketing efforts (Phelps et al., 2004; Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021; Rachmad et al., 2024; Grosul, 2017).

Viral marketing has a clear impact on consumer attitudes, both toward the marketing itself and the brands involved. Pleasant emotional tones in viral ads lead to the most positive attitudes toward both the ad and the brand, as well as a higher intention to share the content. Emotional responses to viral marketing are key drivers of whether consumers develop favourable or unfavourable attitudes toward the brand and the ad itself (Eckler & Bolls, 2011; Pham et al., 2024).

Informativeness, entertainment, and especially source credibility are important factors that positively affect attitudes toward viral marketing. Messages that are seen as credible and informative are more likely to generate positive attitudes, while irritation does not significantly affect attitudes in some contexts (Zernigah & Sohail, 2012; Nordin et al., 2019; Jaidon, 2019).

Positive attitudes toward viral marketing increase the likelihood of consumers engaging in sharing and forwarding behaviors (Izquierdo & José-Cabezudo, 2011; Huang et al., 2013; Modiri-Delshad, 2015) and it also directly and positively affect business competitiveness and performance, and mediate the impact of viral marketing messages on these outcomes (Tandijaya & Hatane, 2021).

Hence it may be assumed that Viral marketing messages has a strong and multifaceted effect on consumer behaviour and enhance purchase intentions. The impact of viral marketing messages on purchase intentions is generally mediated through consumer engagement, attitude towards viral marketing and brand, trust and credibility of source. While the attitude towards viral marketing is affected by message characteristics such as informativeness, entertainment, customisation, interactivity and EWOM messages. In accordance with the literature this study proposes that:

H1: attitude towards viral marketing significantly and positively affects consumer purchase intentions.

3. Informative VM Messages

Informativeness and argument quality in viral marketing messages significantly enhance consumers' attitudes toward advertisements and brands. When messages provide valuable, clear, and credible information, they foster a more positive attitude toward the ad and the brand itself (Fard & Marvi, 2019; Petrescu et al., 2015; Ismail et al., 2022; Prajogo & Purwanto, 2020; Amperawati et al., 2024; Tien et al., 2019; Liu & Wang, 2019). Attitude toward the ad acts as a key mediator, meaning that a positive attitude developed from informative content leads to greater viral sharing and, ultimately, stronger purchase intentions (Petrescu et al., 2015; Prajogo & Purwanto, 2020).

Perceived informativeness, source credibility, and usefulness of viral marketing messages are consistently linked to higher purchase intentions across various product categories, including mobile apps, eco-labelled products, and cosmetics (Fard & Marvi, 2019; Choshaly & Mirabolghasemi, 2020; Ismail et al., 2022; Amperawati et al., 2024; Tien et al., 2019; Liu & Wang, 2019; Jovlin & Belgiawan, 2024). Informative messages increase perceived usefulness and trust, which in turn drive consumers' intentions to purchase (Fard & Marvi, 2019; Choshaly & Mirabolghasemi, 2020; Ismail et al., 2022; Tien et al., 2019; Jovlin & Belgiawan, 2024). Informative viral marketing messages have a clear and positive impact on both consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. In accordance with the literature this study proposes that:

H2: informative viral marketing messages significantly and positively affects attitude towards viral advertising.

4. Entertaining VM Messages

Entertaining elements in viral marketing, such as humour or engaging content, are strongly linked to more favourable attitudes toward both the advertisement and the brand itself. This positive attitude is a key driver in consumers' willingness to share the ad and consider purchasing the product (Petrescu et al., 2015; Choshaly & Mirabolghasemi, 2020; Ismail et al., 2022; Liu & Wang, 2019).

Studies consistently show that perceived entertainment in viral marketing messages is positively related to consumers' purchase intentions. When consumers find a message entertaining, they are more likely to develop an intention to buy the product being advertised (Choshaly & Mirabolghasemi, 2020; Ismail et al., 2022; Liu & Wang, 2019; Jovlin & Belgiawan, 2024).

The effect of entertaining content on purchase intention is often mediated by the consumer's attitude toward the ad. A more entertaining ad leads to a better attitude, which then increases both the likelihood of sharing the ad (viral intention) and the intention to purchase (Petrescu et al., 2015; Ismail et al., 2022; Liu & Wang, 2019). Entertaining viral marketing messages clearly

have a significant impact on both consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. In accordance with the literature this study proposes that:

H3: entertaining viral marketing messages significantly and positively affects attitude towards viral advertising.

5. Customised VM Messages

Customised ads lead to more favorable attitudes, especially among consumers with high self-esteem. For those with low self-esteem, customization still effectively improves attitudes toward the ad and the brand (Linardi et al., 2023). Attitude toward the ad and the brand acts as a mediator between message customization and purchase intention, meaning that positive attitudes developed through effective customization lead to higher purchase intentions (Petrescu et al., 2015; Linardi et al., 2023; Jovlin & Belgiawan, 2024; Liu & Wang, 2019).

Customised viral marketing messages directly increase purchase intentions, with the effect being stronger when the message is perceived as credible and relevant (Linardi et al., 2023; Jovlin & Belgiawan, 2024; Amperawati et al., 2024). Customised viral marketing messages have a significant impact on both consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. Personalization and message quality enhance positive attitudes toward ads and brands, which in turn increase the likelihood of sharing the message and making a purchase. Customised viral marketing messages are effective in positively shaping consumer attitudes and increasing purchase intentions. In accordance with the literature this study proposes that:

H4: customised viral marketing messages significantly and positively affects attitude towards viral advertising.

6. EWOM

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) viral marketing messages have a significant and positive effect on both consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. Research consistently shows that eWOM, especially when perceived as credible and useful, can shape how consumers feel about brands and influence their likelihood to buy.

Positive eWOM on social media platforms like Facebook significantly improves brand attitude and increases purchase intention, particularly for consumer electronics and among millennials (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017; Garima & Sheokand, 2024). eWOM messages that are persuasive, informative, and come from trusted sources are more likely to be adopted by consumers, which in turn boosts their intention to purchase (Tien et al., 2019; Erkan & Evans, 2016). The quality, credibility, and usefulness of eWOM are key factors that drive both positive attitudes and higher purchase intentions (Verma et al., 2023; Tien et al., 2019; Erkan & Evans, 2016).

The adoption of eWOM information acts as a strong mediator: when consumers find eWOM credible and useful, they are more likely to adopt the message, which then increases their purchase intention (Sardar et al., 2021; Verma et al., 2023; Tien et al., 2019; Erkan & Evans, 2016). Attitude towards eWOM itself, as well as the perceived needs and usefulness of the information, further strengthen the impact on purchase intention (Verma et al., 2023; Erkan & Evans, 2016; Patel et al., 2023). Meta-analyses confirm that argument quality, message valence, and trust in the eWOM message are among the most effective predictors of purchase intention, while sheer volume or source credibility alone are less influential (Ismagilova et al., 2019; Albayrak & Ceylan, 2021). Marketers can enhance purchase intentions by encouraging the spread of credible, useful, and positive eWOM, and by designing campaigns that foster trust and informativeness in consumer-to-consumer communications (Sardar et al., 2021; Garima & Sheokand, 2024; Tien et al., 2019; Erkan & Evans, 2016). eWOM viral marketing messages play a crucial role in shaping consumer attitudes and driving purchase intentions. In accordance with the literature this study proposes that:

H5: eWOM viral marketing messages significantly and positively affects attitude towards viral advertising.

7. Interactive VM Messages

Interactivity in messages such as active control and reciprocal communication on websites, increases user involvement, which in turn leads to more positive attitudes toward the brand and higher purchase intentions (Ko et al., 2005; Jiang et al., 2010). Interactivity on social platforms promotes information exchange, which can positively influence consumer behavior and purchase decisions (Gu, 2025). Interaction with viral marketing messages (not just passive reception) is crucial for positively influencing brand equity and purchase intentions (Liu & Wang, 2019). Brand Awareness and Trust: Interactivity can also boost brand awareness and trust, further supporting positive purchase intentions (Gu, 2025; Liu & Wang, 2019). The impact of interactivity may depend on product type, user motivations, and the nature of the interaction. For example, reciprocal communication may be more effective for functional products than expressive ones (Jiang et al., 2010).

Attitude toward the product or service often mediates the effect of interactivity on purchase intention, meaning that interactivity shapes attitudes, which then influence buying decisions (Ooi et al., 2023; Ko et al., 2005; Jiang et al., 2010). Interactivity in viral marketing plays a significant role in shaping consumer attitudes and purchase intentions, but its effects can be both positive and negative depending on the context and how interactivity is implemented. Overall, higher interactivity tends to enhance engagement, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions. In accordance with the literature this study proposes that:

H6: interactive viral marketing messages significantly and positively affects attitude towards viral advertising.

8. Theory of Reasoned Action

Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) is a robust and widely used framework for analyzing the effect of viral marketing messages on consumer behaviour specifically consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. Research shows that TRA provides a useful framework for understanding how viral marketing influences attitudes, which in turn shape purchase intentions. TRA has been directly used to examine how viral marketing messages on social media affect users' attitudes and purchase intentions (Fard & Marvi, 2019; Gunawan & Huarng, 2015; Jovlin & Belgiawan, 2024). Viral marketing elements such as argument quality, source credibility, and information quantity influence perceived usefulness and ease of use, which shape attitudes toward the product and ultimately affect purchase intentions (Fard & Marvi, 2019; Jovlin & Belgiawan, 2024).

Studies confirm that attitude toward the behavior is a key mediator between viral marketing exposure and purchase intention, aligning with the TRA model (Fard & Marvi, 2019; Jovlin & Belgiawan, 2024). TRA has been successfully applied to study purchase intentions in various sectors, including mobile apps, luxury fashion, and green products, with attitude being a significant predictor in each case (Fard & Marvi, 2019; Lau et al., 2022; Belleau et al., 2007; Paul et al., 2016; Rabidas & Bowen, 2019; Jiang et al., 2019; Jovlin & Belgiawan, 2024). The model is adaptable and can be extended with additional constructs (e.g., perceived risk, social identity) to better capture the nuances of viral marketing effects (Gunawan & Huarng, 2015; Lau et al., 2022; Paul et al., 2016).

9. VM and Consumer Behaviour Conceptual Model

Based on the above discussion this study proposes the following conceptual involving five viral marketing messages (VMS)—informativeness, entertainment, customisation, interactivity and EWOM affecting attitude towards advertising (ATT) which in turn affect purchase intentions (PI).

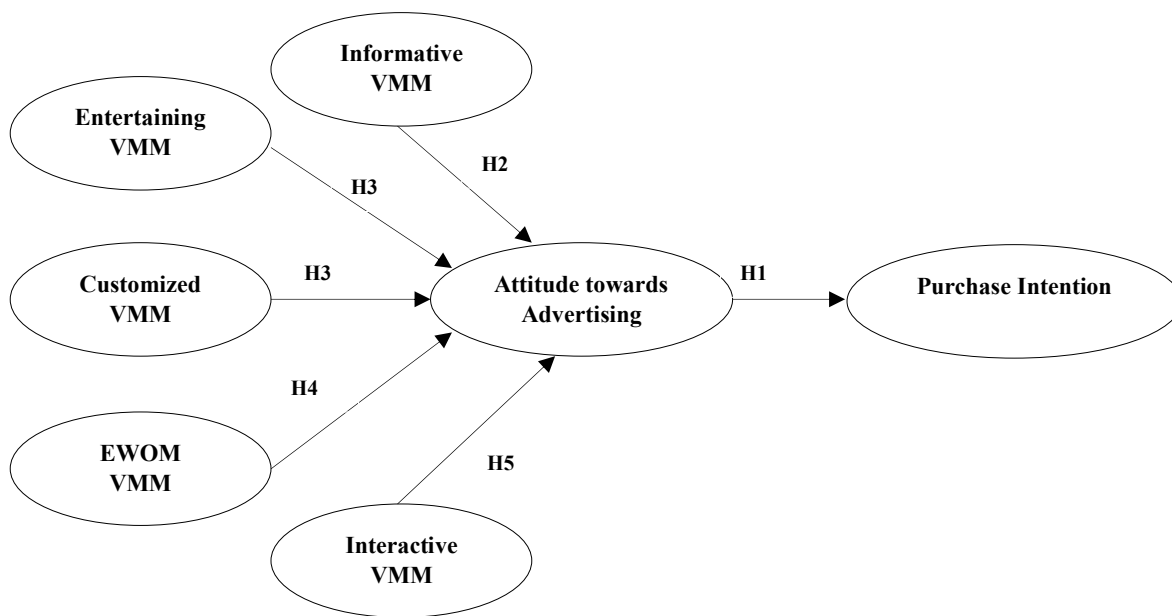


Figure 1: VM Conceptual Model

10. Implications for Marketers

Marketers should focus on creating engaging, informative, and customized content to enhance consumer engagement. Content that is relevant, informative, and entertaining and interactive is more likely to capture consumers' attention and generate positive responses. Customizing content to individual consumer preferences can further enhance its effectiveness. Building brand awareness and fostering customer trust are essential for driving purchase intentions [3]. Consumers are more likely to purchase from brands that they are familiar with and trust and positive eWOM. Marketers need to prioritize building brand awareness and fostering customer trust to drive sales. Understanding the Indian market's cultural and social dynamics is crucial for tailoring effective marketing strategies. The cultural values and social norms of India can influence how consumers respond to social media marketing messages. Marketers need to be aware of these cultural and social dynamics to create effective campaigns.

11. Future Research Scope

Further research is needed to explore the evolving landscape of eWOM and its impact on consumer behaviour. The rapid pace of technological change is constantly transforming the way consumers interact. In summary, this literature review has explored the landscape of social media viral marketing in India, emphasizing its impact on consumer purchase intentions. The effectiveness of informative, entertaining, customized, interactive, and eWOM strategies has been examined, highlighting their roles in shaping consumer behaviour. The mediating effects of brand awareness, brand loyalty, and customer trust further underscore the complexity of these relationships. The future researchers may utilise the conceptual model directly and test it empirically in different Indian context. Future research should continue to explore the evolving landscape of social media viral marketing and its ethical considerations to ensure sustainable and responsible marketing practices.

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