

## Viral Marketing Consumer Purchase Intentions: a Theoretical Review

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**Abstract:** The advent of electronic communication has transformed the nature of modern marketing communication and purchase intentions as a consequence of far reaching changes to society and lifestyles. Viral marketing has captured the attention of academics seeing to better understand its potential. A very competitive market, and demand for successful campaigning requires a strategy and expertise in persuasion. Some knowledge of unsolicited messaging is also necessary along with an awareness of the dangers of reduced purchase intentions. Sustainable marketing strategies require an understanding of new developments which to increasingly attract and retain consumers. Developments in email, online reviews, social media, blogs and online forums are relevant here. On the other hand, viral marketing is seen as an increasingly crucial method of influencing consumer purchasing to grow sales. Despite the best efforts of viral marketing to influence purchase intentions, a number of challenges make it a difficult proposition. Scholars have studied the influence of viral marketing on specific social media platforms, yet limited theoretical insights exists to gain a full appreciate of the factors which influence consumer purchase intentions. Therefore, this study aims to extend multidimensional elements of viral marketing's insight to accentuate theoretical concepts with implications for the practical optimization of viral marketing as a strategy to influence consumer purchase intentions. The social constructivist philosophical position of this research makes it possible to better understood the influence of viral marketing on consumer purchase intentions in the context of fashion industry.

### 1. Introduction

The term 'viral marketing' has grown in popularity in scholarly and practitioner circles over the last few decades [1-3]. Viral marketing has been examined in the context of numerous disciplines including advertising, marketing and management [4], business [5] marketing [6], consumer behavior [7] and the service industry [8]. Despite the uniqueness of these disciplines, if analyzed together, it is clear that viral marketing can influence consumer purchase intentions across many industries [9] however, more work is needed to understand this concept. Scholars have examined viral marketing and purchase intentions across various industries and discipline. These include fashion [10-12], advertising [13,14], hospitality [15], medical care [16,17], retail [18], the automobile industry [19], and election campaigning [20]. Based on previous studies, it can be argued that the fashion industry is an area that requires new research. In the broad context of advertisement marketing and online communications research, viral marketing and purchase intentions in the fashion industry are underdeveloped and truncated areas [10-12].

### 2. Theoretical context: Why viral marketing?

Viral marketing, as a term, can easily be conceptualised, and definitions from the literature reflect a range of meanings that share common ground. Previous researchers [21] stated that an

early understanding of viral marketing is “a marketing strategy that encourages consumers to pass along messages to others in order to generate added exposure” (p. 263) or “a company’s activities to make use of customer’s communication networks to promote and distribute products” [22], (p.158). The literature suggests that although the term viral marketing can be used interchangeably, there are remarkable differences between WOM, eWOM and viral marketing. Viral marketing a distinctive term for two reasons - first, WOM is traditionally slow and local, whereas viral marketing has the potential to exert global reach since it occurs over real time. Second, in terms of cause and effect there are also remarkable differences between viral marketing, WOM and eWOM. Viral marketing creates buzz and builds awareness and it is uncontrollable but the other two are not traceable and can be controlled.

Viral marketing as a phenomenon for both researchers and practitioners; hence, previous studies on viral marketing have looked at the factors which influence consumer purchase intentions. Two notable factors have been identified as the intention of the consumer, and forwarding behavior [10]; [23-25]. Sharing and forwarding of viral messages is associated with peer influence and creditable sources [26]. On the other hand, Gruen [8] empirically demonstrated that viral marketing has such potential that if any company can retain five percent of its customers this can boost sales by up to 100 percent. Thus, viral campaigns can create value for businesses and potential customers. Such campaigns can create customer trust, loyalty and increased product adoption [27]; campaigning can also boost sales [28]. However, a significant numbers of researchers argued that viral marketing is less reliable and emanates often from unknown sources leading to accusations that it is less credible [29]. On the other hand, some studies claim that successful viral marketing is associated with the accurate design of messages which elicit the emotions and desire of targeted audiences. Messages which contain balance emotion elements pose the possibility of huge share and forward results in being the message viral [30]. Some studies have claimed that the success of a viral message depends on features like entertainment, social needs and consumer engagement [31]. However, a growing consensus amongst academics and practitioners suggests that if inappropriate viral messages are designed, advertised products can pose immense risks to the marketer [32,33]. Such risks are associated with the attitude that negative consumer perceptions can themselves go viral [34] and the lack of viral marketing control that marketers have over consumer’s means products can lose popularity and organisations can be boycotted [35].

### **3. Viral marketing and fashion purchase intentions**

The origin of the term viral marketing is as varied as its definitions. Viral marketing has been described variously as word-of-mouth, electronic word of mouth, word-of-mouse, buzz, viral advertising, viral marketing and viral advertising [36]. Many academic articles endorse the definition provided by Juvetson and Draper [37]; these authors state that viral marketing is a form of online word-of-mouth which is enhanced by the use of networks. Previous research has found a range of significant factors in relation to viral marketing which can influence consumer purchase intentions. Examples include information usefulness [38], information credibility [39,40] and information quality [41,42]. Traditional consumer purchase intentions are the combined assets of activity, such as information gathering, ordering, and obtaining and consuming products and services [43,44]. These activities are influenced by time, money and culture. Beyond these factors, online consumer purchase intentions are influenced by the same dynamic and complex issues such as reference and peer groups, context and blog reviews [45]. Consumer purchase intentions, preferences and recommendations are typically the subject of psychological analysis and can be categorized under idealized behavior associated with internal and external factors such as sex, age, location, socio-political environment, reference-group and peer-group [46].

Generally, fashion consumers are very inconsistent due to the frequency with which they change their preferences for fashion items. This frequency is also associated with the notion of modern purchase intentions and it can be influenced by unknown factors [47,48]. The emergence of technology and the internet has benefitted the fashion industry. Thus, fashion consumer purchase intentions have been influenced by a diverse spectrum of e-communication, relationships and

external factors such as blogging, tweeting, networking and online trends [49,50]. Traditional purchase variables remain relevant in the online purchase era. These variables include motivation, trust, family, friends and life-style. However, rapid changes in the social environment and the diverse nature of online communication influence modern purchase intentions significantly. Therefore, viral marketing has come to be associated with new variables which strongly influence purchase intentions such as online feedback, competitive messaging, peer-recommendations, reference groups and interpretations. Thus, identification of the multi-dimensional nature of viral marketing and its effect will help researchers to understand the relationship between purchase intentions and viral marketing.

#### **4. Managerial implications and conclusion**

This research finds that viral marketing creates huge potential for revenue earning due to time, money and its cost effective nature. Therefore, focus and spending trend on the viral marketing become much more than traditional method of marketing [51,52]. In the context of modern consumer purchase intentions, there are a few elements which play an effective role in viral marketing such as growing online communications, technological developments and the frequent exchange of information [53,54]. This study provides effective and significant managerial implications as it address the elements of viral marketing which influence consumer purchase intentions. Online platforms associated with viral marketing are very important for marketers because of the presence and activity of potential consumers [55] which helps them to better understand consumer perceptions about the product, along with their purchasing pattern. Therefore, the influential factors in relation to viral marketing and the determinants of purchase intentions found by the proposed study can help marketers to design effective marketing strategies and influence purchase intentions. To design, measure and execute a successful viral campaign, in 2010, Cudmore has suggested a model called AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action and Satisfied). This model suggests that viral messages influence consumer propensity and awareness by creating interest and desire, and drawing attention to consumers to motivate them to take action. This ultimately leads to more purchases. In viral communication, marketers and organizations get relief from the issues like privacy and legal because the mutual communication such as peer-to-peer, friends, family and online groups [22,56]; moreover, in this process the unsolicited messages can reach inbox instead of being spam.

However, in academia there is much research available on viral marketing, word-of-mouth and eWOM and many scholars have written about the influence these have on brand awareness and purchase intentions [57,30,58,59]. Previous studies have highlighted the centrality of forwarding and receiving viral messages between peer to peer. In particular, these studies have focused on product engagement, product awareness and attracting new consumers. Due to the emergence of new technologies, viral marketing propagation has achieved the highest level of coverage compared to traditional methods of communication [5]. The role of viral marketing is an important aspect where the aim is to explore consumer attitudes, and how these influence individuals' beliefs and intentions [60]. Existing literature focuses sharply on viral marketing and the social relationship between sending, receiving and opening messages within social networks. Thus, a balanced design in terms of viral message can increase forwarding and share tendencies resulting in viral. Effective viral message can influence brand awareness and can leads to potential purchases [58]. Therefore, this study offers a profound insight into various aspects of viral marketing as well as consumer attitudes and social determents. The relationship between these variables is also highlighted. Moreover, this study has considered previous consumer viral marketing experiences and perceptions and the extent to which these influence purchase intentions in the context of the fashion industry. The research has integrated findings and theories from other areas related to viral marketing where sharing or forwarding messages is an incentive. Examples include WOM, eWOM and word of mouse. Thus, the above exploration develops a theoretical construct which provides insights into consumer attitudinal and social determents. It has explored consumer intentions to share and forward messages in the context of the fashion industries.

Consumer purchase intentions are influenced by an unknown range of factors [47,48]. An exploration of viral marketing and its influence on consumer purchase intentions can be very fruitful for organizations [63] and marketers who can use this research to design effective viral campaigns [64,65]. The viral phenomenon indicates that a successful viral message is more 'customer-focused' rather than 'organization-focused'; because customers are mostly attracted to entertaining and emotional content of viral message [66-68]. Viral messaging content, along with external factors such as friends, family, relatives, reference groups, blogs and online reviews influence modern purchase intentions. As such, marketers design viral messages which attract consumers. Despite, the relevance of traditional purchase variables such as trust and motivation in modern purchase behavior there are some other elements which dominate the diverse nature of online marketing communications [69]. Examples include blogs, customer reviews and rapid changes to social environments [70]. Thus, the multidimensional factors associated with viral marketing play a very effective role in purchase intentions and there is a need to empirically examine this in more detail. This study has achieved this and has created a better understanding of the relationship between viral marketing and purchase intentions in the context of the fashion industry.

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