

Viral Marketing and Follower Engagement in a Selected Online Business in Shandong Province, China



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ABSTRACT: Digital platforms play a very important role in the behavior of the consumer, and consequently, viral marketing has turned out to be the most appropriate form of marketing for online companies. This is because it develops awareness and interaction on the firm brand. In this context, this paper looks into the extent to which an internet firm employs strategies of viral marketing and how much these strategies influence follower engagement. Using a structured survey, respondents assessed significant aspects of viral marketing techniques including content quality, emotional ties, perceived authenticity, following incentive, and trust. Moreover, engagement degrees were evaluated using social dynamics, identity alignment, believability, emotional and cognitive linkages. The findings reveal that while the marketing campaigns of the business are usually seen as successful, they have less direct influence on involvement. The most important elements were seen as authenticity and trust, which suggests that audience impression depends much on believability. Follower motivation and emotional attachments are significantly lower, indicating some areas of improvement for better audience interaction. Similar results were found regarding the levels of engagement, thus believability and identity alignment were stronger than emotional and cognitive ties. The weak and statistically insignificant correlation between engagement and viral marketing techniques demonstrated by the correlation research indicates that the efficacy of the content itself does not always guarantee high levels of interaction. To reduce the gap, companies need to combine interactive, community-driven projects with traditional viral marketing. This study emphasizes that when businesses want to promote continuous audience engagement, they should provide the first priority on creating emotionally involving, personalized content.

KEYWORDS: Viral Marketing, Follower Engagement, Brand Trust, Social Dynamics, Content Strategy, Digital Marketing

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have gained a noticeable growth spurt in recent years, thus affecting traditional marketing approaches and creating viral marketing as an indispensable tool for consumer engagement and brand building. Thus, viral marketing can be described as a process whereby content is rapidly sent across digital frontiers through the transmission among users, a very successful and cost-effective way of reaching large audiences (Yanchuk & Horelova, 2022). Businesses everywhere are increasingly entering other foreign markets and directly interacting with consumers through the social web, mostly via sites like Instagram, TikHub, and WeChat. The unusual change is observable in China, where a digital renaissance and significant internet penetration have rendered social media marketing an important business success factor, especially in populous and economically vigorous areas like Shandong Province.

A critical element of viral marketing, follower engagement relates to consumer interactions and responses showing their interest and loyalty to the brand. Such interactions significantly enhance the marketing message reach-through likes, shares, comments, and even user-generated content-Church et al., 2020. Besides the natural spread of content, follower engagement enhances brand awareness and better client connections. There is evidence to suggest that follower engagement is a multidimensional construct influenced by factors such as content quality, emotional appeal, was perceived as authentic, and brand or influencer perceived credibility (Melnychuk et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2017). Therefore, good viral marketing depends on building a sense of trust and connection with followers as well as on creating aesthetically pleasing or instructive material (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017).

Within the framework of Chinese online company, consumer decision-making processes depend much on viral marketing and follower interaction. Studies suggest that Chinese consumers are highly responsive to influencer endorsements, interactive elements, and other inputs that might affect their purchase decisions (Wei et al., 2022). For example, campaigns run by the influencer on platforms such as WeChat Official Accounts have succeeded for generating both consumer engagement and brand loyalty since followers develop a sense of relationship and trust with the influencers being followed (Guo et al., 2017). Such cultural leaning in China towards community payment experience rather social sharing and recommendation, accentuate this dynamic (Spekking,

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2020). Certainly, viral marketing needs to be employed strategically in order to have successfully engage its followers and to remain competitive in the e-commerce scene which in itself is competitive, especially in fast-developing areas such as Shandong Province.

The present study focused on finding how viral marketing constructs and where they are followed by an online company selected in China's Shandong province. It seeks to find how all the various components of viral marketing—from attractive content to the credibility of the influencer and interactive elements—along with other things, add their share to follower engagement and help those small-scale businesses taste success. Through current literature and empirical findings, it will bring into light the role of viral marketing tactics to improve the follower engagement and motivating brand loyalty from the escaping environment of digitalism. The contribution of this study to the understanding of the effectiveness of viral marketing in China's unique social media context and the insightful recommendations that it provides to Shandong Province online companies maximize their digital marketing efforts. It is in China over the last ten years that social media and e-commerce have come to unprecedented levels of development, making the country one of the largest digital markets in the world. China has made a unique environment in which millions of internet users and more than 850 million social media users are anticipated to have great influences on consumer behavior, leading to more than possible statistical figures (Statista 2023). The government has actively encouraged digitization, and there is increased penetration of mobile phones that has fast-tracked the entire digitization and made e-business inarguably part of national lifeblood. Shandong Province, an economically vibrant province along the eastern coast of China, houses fast urbanizing and heavy consumer-based activities highly involved in online shopping. Therefore, social media marketing methods, especially viral marketing, have become so critical to companies operating in Shandong Province in grabbing customer attention and competing within this active digital marketplace.

The significance of this study is seen in its possible influence on the chosen Shandong Province company, so offering insightful analysis of successful viral marketing strategies. For Chinese online companies, follower interaction is a major metric of consumer loyalty and brand performance. Engaged followers are more likely to disseminate brand messaging, take part in promotions, and finally make purchase decisions, so increasing income and customer retention (Setiawan et al., 2024). This research can assist the company maximize its marketing activities, create closer relationships with consumers, and acquire a competitive advantage in a congested market by determining which viral marketing techniques are most successful in involving followers. Knowing the subtleties of follower involvement can also help the company to better manage resources, emphasizing on content and influencer relationships that have the most effect. Thus, this study fills in a gap in the aspect of viral marketing and follower involvement in the regional online corporate environment of China. Although many studies have looked at the efficacy of viral marketing in Western context, less research has focused on how similar techniques work in the Chinese digital scene, where social media platforms, user behavior, and cultural values vary greatly.

Research Questions

1. What is the assessment of the respondents on the Viral Marketing strategies used by the online business in terms of:
 - 1.1. quality of content;
 - 1.2. emotional connections;
 - 1.3. perceived authenticity;
 - 1.4. follower motivation; and
 - 1.5. trust?
2. What is the assessment of the respondents on the level of follower engagement of the online business in terms of:
 - 2.1. emotional and cognitive connections;
 - 2.2. credibility,
 - 2.3. social dynamics; and
 - 2.4. identity alignment?
3. Is there a significant correlation in the assessment of the respondents on the Viral Marketing strategies and level of follower engagement of the online business?

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative approach was essential for this study as it allowed for objective measurement and analysis of the constructs involved, providing statistically reliable insights into how different elements of viral marketing—such as content quality, emotional connections, authenticity, follower motivation, and trust—correlated with various aspects of follower engagement, including emotional and cognitive connections, credibility, social dynamics, and identity alignment.

By using this design, the study identified whether significant differences existed in respondents' evaluations of viral marketing effectiveness and engagement, based on demographic factors or other relevant group characteristics. Additionally, this design allowed for the exploration of correlations between viral marketing elements and engagement levels, which was crucial for understanding which strategies most effectively promoted follower interaction.

This design was necessary to provide an evidence-based foundation for optimizing viral marketing efforts. By focusing on quantifiable correlations, the study produced data that helped the organization make informed decisions about which aspects of its

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marketing approach were most influential in fostering engagement, ultimately contributing to stronger brand loyalty and customer retention.

The study was conducted in Shandong Province, China, a region known for its rapid economic development and digital transformation, which has established it as one of China's key economic hubs. The 200 participants for this study were purposefully selected employees of the chosen online business in Shandong Province. Employees were chosen based on specific criteria to ensure that they had direct knowledge of and involvement with the company's viral marketing strategies and follower engagement efforts. The primary instrument for this study was a researcher-designed questionnaire aimed at gathering quantitative data on employee perceptions of the company's viral marketing strategies and follower engagement levels. The questionnaire consisted of structured, closed-ended questions, divided into two main sections, each covering specific constructs relevant to the study's objectives. Each construct contained six statements to capture various dimensions comprehensively. Responses were measured on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," to quantify levels of agreement with each statement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Summary Table: Assessment of the Respondents on the Viral Marketing Strategies Used by the Online Business

Aspect	Overall Mean	Standard Deviation	Qualitative Description/ Verbal Interpretation
1. Quality of Content	3.39	0.391	Agree – Evident
2. Emotional Connections	3.22	0.305	Agree – Evident
3. Perceived Authenticity	3.40	0.393	Agree – Evident
4. Follower Motivation	3.29	0.383	Agree – Evident
5. Trust	3.42	0.359	Agree – Evident

This study thoroughly analyzes what viral marketing is, specifically in terms of internet enterprises, one of which appears to utilize very many avenues from all the five currently assessed dimensions as measured by participants-in-general rating "Agree-Evident" on all. Thus the results also indicate that while the effectiveness of marketing is seen in such a way by participants, it is still far from achieving the level where no more need for improvement is needed in order to further entice respondents on the marketing materials and to increase interests.

Trust (3.42) became one of the top raters on the lengthy list of characteristics. This means that most respondents have considered the organization credible and dependable. Trust is a vital ingredient for effective viral marketing because it builds consumer confidence in their long-term loyalty to a brand. A high trusting condition indicates that most followers will view the brand's messages as genuine and possibly engage with its content and, thus, convert into loyal customers. However, despite the favorable perception, it is somewhat low; thus, there is still room for improvement in this trust-based engagement perhaps via transparent communication and activities to fortify but also act as credibility enhancers like consumer testimonials and endorsements by authorities.

Perceived Authenticity (3.40) received a strong rating, just below trust, indicating that respondents see the brand's marketing efforts as legitimate and transparent. Authenticity is important for interacting with customers; especially in a digital world where users tend to distrust anything that looks too polished or overly dramatized. The better a company presents itself as being credible and trustworthy, the better its image. Despite the fact that a standard deviation of 0.393 also indicates variability in responses, meaning while the majority of followers deem the brand authentic, some perceive flaws still to be corrected—mainly concerning some issues of influencer credibility or messaging consistency.

Quality of Content (3.39) is another positive area that shows that, in general, people feel the company does well in producing engaging, informative, and visually appealing content. In viral marketing, high-quality content is a very critical aspect for determining the success of the undertaking, since it influences both engagement with the audience and sharing. Nonetheless, despite the comparatively high overall rating, some subcategories—namely visual appeal (3.03) and audience reaction (3.02)—received marginally lower scores, suggesting that although the information is perceived as meaningful, it may not consistently elicit robust engagement or emotional resonance. Improving the creativity, clarity, and emotional impact of the material may enhance these elements and thereby increase audience engagement. The assessment reveals a favorable perception of the internet business's viral marketing techniques, with high ratings in trust, authenticity, and content quality. The results show areas that can be improved, such as making content more appealing, increasing emotional engagement, and creating a natural desire for followers to participate.

The data shows the extent to which the company's viral marketing efforts encourage user engagement, such as likes, shares, and comments. The data indicate that, although the business has achieved some success in motivating its followers, engagement levels remain susceptible to enhancement. Extrinsic motivators, including promotions and giveaways, garnered higher ratings, whereas intrinsic motivators, such as content relevancy and perceived worth, obtained marginally lower scores. This suggests that

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although the brand successfully employs incentives to promote involvement, it should prioritize cultivating organic engagement through substantive and accessible content.

The aspect with the lowest rating, albeit still categorized within the "Agree – Evident" category, is Emotional Connections (3.22). This indicates that although the brand elicits some emotional connection with its audience, the effect is not notably robust. Emotional connection is an essential element of viral marketing, as information that evokes strong emotions is more prone to being shared and retained. The comparatively lower ranking in this category suggests that the business should enhance its investment in narrative, personalized engagement, and material that elicits more profound emotional reactions from its audience.

Table 2. Summary Table: Assessment of the Respondents on the Level of Follower Engagement of the Online Business

Aspect	Overall Mean	Standard Deviation	Qualitative Description/ Verbal Interpretation
Emotional & Cognitive Connections	2.96	0.445	Agree – Engaged
Credibility	3.29	0.383	Agree – Engaged
Social Dynamics	3.13	0.369	Agree – Engaged
Identity Alignment	3.19	0.447	Agree – Engaged

The holistic appraisal of the way in which a follower interacts with the organization is such that there seems to be a minimal degree of connection because all the constructs fall within the "Agree – Engaged" classification. The outcomes portray that the brand has managed to entice people into its fold, though not in all cases. Some with respect to emotional and cognitive ties show the room for improvement, while others such as Credibility are seen more positively.

Credibility, with a score of 3.29, came in as the highest among the assessed variables indicating that respondents normally see the brand as a credible information source. Engagement of a brand depends much on the legitimacy of its products since followers are more likely to interact with material they consider dependable and authoritative. The quite high score in this field indicates that the company has successfully positioned itself as a credible player in its sector. Though credibility helps to engage people, the results suggest that credibility by itself might not be enough to create strong emotional or cognitive links with followers.

A favorable score in addition to Identity Alignment (3.19) suggests that followers personally connect with the brand on beliefs and identity. It is a sign that the business is already able to create a personal connection and community among its target market. Some associations and messages of the brand resonate bang on with some of its supporters, but others may not have found it quite a match yet. The small standard deviation (.447) indicates differences in how the distinct audience segments relate to the brand while also leaving room for message improvements and personalization in order to optimize identity-based interaction.

Social Dynamics (3.13) emphasizes how strongly follower involvement is driven by peer influence, community involvement, and social contacts. Although the results show that social elements influence involvement, the score shows that the marketing activities of the brand have not particularly strong community component. Although peer recommendations and endorsements received high marks, the results imply that organic, community-driven interactions—such as user comments, content sharing, and brand-related conversations—could be especially supported to produce a more socially active and interactive follower base.

Emotional & Cognitive Connections (2.96) is the lowest-rated quality; although followers interact with the brand's content to some degree, the emotional and intellectual depth of that interaction stays small. This implies that even if the substance of the brand could be intriguing and enticing, it would not necessarily inspire powerful feelings, deep thought, or long-term reflection. The lower ranking in this category suggests that the company could have to improve its narrative, thought leadership, and emotionally striking material to establish a closer psychological link with its consumers.

Table 3. Correlation between the Assessment of the Respondents on the Viral Marketing Strategies and Level of Follower Engagement of the Online Business

Overall Viral Marketing Strategies and Level of Follower Engagement	Pearson Correlation	Accepted
	Sig. (2-tailed)	Not Significant
	Decision	-.136
	Interpretation	.055

The correlation analysis between the respondents' assessment of the viral marketing strategies and their level of follower engagement reveals a Pearson correlation coefficient of -0.136 with a significance value of 0.055. Since the significance level is greater than 0.05, the correlation is considered statistically not significant. This means that there is no strong relationship between how respondents perceive the effectiveness of the brand's viral marketing strategies and their actual engagement with the brand.

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The negative correlation value of -0.136 suggests a weak and inverse relationship between these two variables. While this does not imply a direct negative effect, it indicates that improvements or high ratings in viral marketing strategies do not necessarily result in increased follower engagement. This finding suggests that while the brand's marketing strategies may be well-received, they may not be the primary factor driving audience interaction. One possible explanation for this weak correlation is that follower engagement is influenced by various external factors beyond marketing strategies, such as brand loyalty, product quality, pricing, and industry trends. Additionally, engagement may depend on deeper emotional or interactive aspects of content rather than just its visual appeal or informativeness.

Another interpretation of this finding is that viral marketing campaigns often prioritize short-term visibility and reach but may not necessarily contribute to long-term, sustained engagement. While the brand's marketing efforts may successfully capture attention, they may lack the emotional depth or community-driven aspects needed to foster strong audience participation over time. Furthermore, there could be a potential mismatch between the content being promoted and the expectations or interests of the audience. If the content does not fully resonate with followers on a personal or emotional level, engagement levels may remain relatively low despite the perceived effectiveness of the marketing strategies.

Although the results suggest that viral marketing strategies alone are not a strong driver of engagement, this does not diminish their importance. Instead, it highlights the need for a more integrated approach that goes beyond traditional marketing efforts. To bridge the gap between marketing effectiveness and engagement, the brand could benefit from enhancing interactivity, fostering deeper community engagement, and personalizing content strategies based on audience preferences. Measuring engagement through more dynamic indicators, such as user-generated content, real-time interactions, and audience participation in discussions, may provide a clearer picture of how effectively the brand connects with its followers.

To summarize, although the viral marketing strategies employed by the company do increase exposure and awareness, it does not appear that these strategies are the primary element that influences engagement with the brand. Increasing the effectiveness of these strategies and resulting in more significant and long-lasting follower engagement may be accomplished by strengthening emotional bonds, encouraging interactive interaction, and building a feeling of community on the part of the followers.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrate that despite the relatively good reception of viral marketing strategies employed by online businesses, they have little effect on the actual levels of engagement recorded by followers. The evaluation of marketing strategies revealed strengths such as trust and authenticity in terms of quality of content, suggesting that the brand is perceived as credible and engaging. However, it was reflected that emotional connection and motivation to interact certainly posed room for improvement, which indicated that while it caught interest, it didn't lead to active participation that easily. For instance, results from follower engagements also show that even identification alignment, social dynamics, and credibility were at moderate levels while both emotional and cognitive connections were the lowest. The weak and nonsignificant relationship between viral marketing strategies and engagement also says that although marketing efforts pay off with better brand awareness, users do not really get to experience higher interaction with it. Emotional resonance needs to be developed first with the brand if engagement is to be improved in the future, along with engaging the community in personal and appealing ways to bring less distance in the content presented. More benefit-driven and interactive strategies should integrate themselves into the business, thereby consolidating more effectively and permanently their audience.

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