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Examining the Conditional Process of Viral Marketing: The Role of Message Antecedents, Brand Mediators, and Consumer Engagement on Purchase Intention and Word-of-Mouth

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Abstract

Aim: This study investigates how viral marketing message factors influence purchase intention and word-of-mouth, examining the mediating roles of brand-related outcomes and the moderating effect of consumer engagement.

Methodology: Data were collected from 504 respondents using a pre-tested survey. CFA was conducted to validate the measurement model, followed by SEM to test hypothesized relationships. PROCESS Macro Model 8 was applied to examine the moderated mediation effects of consumer engagement.

Key Findings: All proposed hypotheses were supported. Message antecedents (emotional appeal, message valence, storytelling quality, and novelty & creativity) positively influenced purchase intention and word-of-mouth. Brand-related mediators (engaging participants, brand awareness, brand image) significantly mediated these relationships. Consumer engagement moderated both direct and indirect effects, strengthening the impact of antecedents on outcomes.

Managerial Implications: Marketers should design viral campaigns that combine emotional appeal, message valence, storytelling, and creativity to maximize purchase intention and word-of-mouth. Focusing on building brand awareness, engaging participants, and enhancing brand image amplifies campaign effectiveness. Encouraging higher consumer engagement through interactive content and personalized experiences further strengthens both direct and mediated effects, making campaigns more impactful and shareable.

Originality and Contributions: This study integrates multiple viral marketing antecedents with brand-related mediators and consumer engagement in a conditional-process (Model 8) framework,

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providing a comprehensive understanding of purchase intention and word-of-mouth. It offers both theoretical and practical insights by demonstrating how engagement amplifies the effectiveness of creative and emotionally appealing messages.

Keywords: Viral marketing. Social Media platforms, Novelty and Creativity, Message Valence, e-Word-of-Mouth, Brand Awareness

JEL Classification: M31, M37, D83, C38

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Introduction

Viral marketing in 2025 has evolved into a sophisticated strategy that blends creativity, technology, and consumer psychology to achieve unprecedented reach and engagement. Brands are increasingly leveraging short-form video content, particularly on platforms like TikTok, to capture the fleeting attention of audiences. Studies indicate that such content is more likely to go viral due to its concise and engaging nature (Singh, 2025). Moreover, the integration of artificial intelligence in content creation has enabled brands to produce highly personalized and relevant campaigns, enhancing their chances of virality (Theodorakopoulos, 2025). Consumer behaviour plays a pivotal role in the success of viral marketing campaigns. Research highlights that Generation Z consumers are significantly influenced by viral marketing messages, which can shape their attitudes and purchasing intentions (Singh, 2025). Additionally, the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) has been identified as a critical factor that drives consumer engagement and decision-making in the context of viral campaigns (Qosidah et al., 2025). However, the landscape is not without its challenges. A study by Sprout Social (2025) reveals that a third of consumers find it embarrassing when brands jump on viral trends without genuine relevance, indicating the importance of authenticity in viral marketing. Furthermore, the saturation of content has led to a phenomenon termed the "sea of beige," where platforms' algorithms promote uniform content, potentially stifling creativity (Theodorakopoulos, 2025). Therefore, while viral marketing in 2025 offers immense opportunities for brand visibility and engagement, it requires a nuanced approach that combines innovative content creation, understanding of consumer psychology, and a commitment to authenticity to navigate the complexities of the digital landscape (Sathyanarayana S, 2024).

In the rapidly evolving digital landscape of 2025, viral marketing has emerged as a potent strategy for influencing consumer behaviour and driving purchase intentions. Despite its widespread adoption, the intricate mechanisms through which viral marketing impacts consumer decisions remain underexplored. Existing literature indicates that emotional responses, such as anxiety and love, can significantly enhance the virality of content, thereby influencing consumer engagement

and subsequent purchase intentions (Yu, 2025; Amra & Elma, 2025). Furthermore, consumer behaviour has been identified as a critical mediating factor in this relationship, with studies highlighting its role in translating viral marketing exposure into actual purchase decisions (Fitriani et al., 2025; Bhowmik & Pandit, 2025). Additionally, brand awareness has been recognized as a significant antecedent that, when combined with viral marketing efforts, can further amplify purchase intentions (Bhowmik & Pandit, 2025). However, the interplay between these variables' emotional responses, consumer behaviour, and brand awareness remains insufficiently understood. This gap in the literature necessitates a comprehensive investigation to delineate the pathways through which viral marketing influences consumer purchase intentions, accounting for the mediating roles of emotional responses, consumer behaviour, and brand awareness. Such an understanding is crucial for marketers aiming to design effective viral campaigns that resonate with consumers and drive purchasing decisions.

The importance of this study lies in its focus on understanding how viral marketing influences consumer purchase intentions in the contemporary digital landscape, where social media and online platforms dominate consumer interactions. Despite the widespread use of viral marketing, the mechanisms through which it affects consumer behaviour, including the mediating role of consumer behaviour and emotional responses, remain underexplored. Emotional responses, such as anxiety, excitement, or love, have been shown to significantly affect content virality and, consequently, consumer engagement and purchase decisions (Yu, 2025; Amra & Elma, 2025). Moreover, consumer behaviour mediates the relationship between exposure to viral marketing and actual purchase intentions, highlighting its critical role in translating marketing efforts into measurable outcomes (Fitriani et al., 2025; Bhowmik & Pandit, 2025). Brand awareness, as an antecedent, further strengthens the impact of viral marketing campaigns, suggesting that the combination of strategic messaging and brand recognition can significantly amplify purchase intentions (Bhowmik & Pandit, 2025). Given these gaps, this study aims to provide a comprehensive framework to understand the pathways through which viral marketing affects consumer behaviour and purchase decisions.

The paper is structured as follows: Part 2 presents a detailed literature review covering viral marketing, consumer behaviour, emotional responses, and brand awareness to establish the theoretical foundation. Part 3 outlines the research methodology, including the design, sampling, and analytical procedures. Part 4 discusses the results and their implications for both theory and practice. Finally, Part 5 concludes the study with key insights, practical recommendations for marketers, and directions for future research.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

The theoretical foundation of this study on viral marketing integrates multiple perspectives to explain how and why viral content influences consumer behaviour and purchase intentions. The Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003) provides insights into how viral marketing content spreads rapidly among users through

early adopters and opinion leaders, highlighting the role of social networks in content dissemination. Complementing this, Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958; Blau, 1964) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) emphasize the role of perceived benefits, social norms, and behavioural intentions in motivating consumers to engage with and share viral content. The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1974) further explains that consumers actively seek out content that fulfills needs for entertainment, social connection, or self-expression, which can enhance engagement with viral campaigns. Additionally, Emotional Contagion Theory (Hatfield et al., 1994) emphasises the importance of emotional appeals such as excitement, awe, or love in driving virality and influencing consumer purchase intentions, as supported by empirical studies highlighting the role of emotions in content sharing (Yu, 2025; Amra & Elma, 2025). Finally, research on consumer behaviour as a mediating factor confirms that the interplay between viral marketing, emotional engagement, and brand awareness significantly affects purchase decisions (Fitriani et al., 2025; Bhowmik & Pandit, 2025). Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the mechanisms through which viral marketing campaigns impact consumer behaviour and purchase intentions.

Emotional Appeal with Brand Awareness, Brand Image, and Audience Involvement

Emotional appeal plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer perceptions and responses to marketing content, particularly in the context of viral marketing. Research indicates that emotionally engaging content, whether evoking excitement, love, humour, or awe, significantly enhances consumers' attention, retention, and sharing behaviours (Yu, 2025; Amra & Elma, 2025). Emotional appeal is theorised to positively influence brand awareness, as content that resonates emotionally is more likely to be remembered and recognized by consumers, thereby increasing the likelihood of brand recall and visibility (Bhowmik & Pandit, 2025). Similarly, emotional appeal is expected to impact brand image, as repeated exposure to content that triggers positive emotions contributes to favorable associations with the brand, enhancing its perceived credibility, trustworthiness, and overall reputation (Fitriani et al., 2025). Furthermore, audience involvement serves as a crucial mediator in the relationship between emotional appeal and brand-related outcomes. Highly engaging and emotionally appealing content encourages consumers to interact, comment, and share, reflecting a deeper level of cognitive and affective engagement with the brand (Yu, 2025; Amra & Elma, 2025). This interaction not only strengthens the consumer-brand relationship but also reinforces both brand awareness and brand image through social validation and peer influence. Based on these theoretical and empirical arguments, it is anticipated that emotional appeal positively influences brand awareness, brand image, and audience involvement, thereby establishing the groundwork for empirical testing. Based on the above arguments, the following hypotheses have been proposed to be tested in this study:

$H_{1, 2, 3}$: Emotional appeal shares a significant positive relationship with increased brand awareness of the content, creates brand image and attitude, and audience involvement.

Message Valance, Brand Awareness, Brand Image, and Attitude

Message valence, referring to the positive or negative framing of marketing messages, has been shown to play a critical role in shaping consumer cognition, affect, and behaviour in digital marketing contexts, particularly within viral campaigns. Positive message valence tends to generate favorable emotional responses, which enhance brand awareness by increasing the likelihood that consumers will notice, remember, and recall brand-related content (Bhowmik & Pandit, 2025; Fitriani et al., 2025). Conversely, negatively valenced messages may evoke stronger emotional reactions such as anger or fear, which can increase attention but may also create resistance or negative associations if not carefully aligned with brand values (Yu, 2025). Beyond awareness, brand image is significantly influenced by message valence because consistent exposure to positively framed messages strengthens consumers' perceptions of the brand's credibility, quality, and trustworthiness, whereas negative framing may erode perceived brand equity or alter consumer attitudes (Amra & Elma, 2025; Fitriani et al., 2025). Importantly, audience involvement - the degree to which consumers actively engage with content - moderates these effects, as highly involved consumers process message valence more deeply, integrating emotional cues into their cognitive evaluation of the brand (Tabrizi & Narmina, 2024). This interplay between message valence, consumer engagement, and brand perception underscores the need for marketers to carefully design viral content that leverages positive emotional framing while ensuring alignment with brand identity to maximize both brand awareness and a favorable brand image. Consequently, understanding these relationships is crucial for predicting consumer responses and designing effective viral marketing campaigns that not only capture attention but also foster enduring brand loyalty. Consequently, examining the relationships between message valence, brand awareness, and brand image provides valuable insights into designing effective viral marketing campaigns that maximise favourable brand outcomes. Based on the above arguments, the researchers have posited the following hypotheses to be tested:

$H_{4,5}$: Message Valance shares a significant positive relationship with increased brand awareness of the content and creates brand image and attitude.

Storytelling Quality, Engagement, and Brand Image in Viral Marketing

Storytelling quality has emerged as a critical determinant of consumer engagement in digital marketing contexts. Well-structured, coherent, and emotionally resonant narratives are more likely to capture audience attention, foster interaction, and stimulate participation (Cai, 2025; Pulizzi, 2012). Research suggests that narratives enable consumers to relate to the content, enhancing cognitive and emotional involvement, which subsequently drives engagement behaviours such as liking, sharing, and commenting (Escalas, 2004; Fog et al., 2005). Engagement, in turn, plays a pivotal role in shaping brand perceptions. Highly engaging storytelling enhances consumers' brand awareness and strengthens brand image by creating memorable experiences and fostering positive associations (Lundqvist et al., 2013; Brechman et al., 2015). Moreover, interactive and participatory campaigns, grounded in

compelling narratives, have been shown to cultivate deeper affective connections with the brand, influencing brand loyalty and advocacy (Hollebeek, 2011; Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Despite these insights, limited studies have simultaneously examined the mediating role of engagement between storytelling quality and brand image in viral marketing campaigns. Addressing this gap can provide actionable strategies for marketers to design narratives that maximize both engagement and brand equity. Based on the above literature review, the following hypothesis is proposed:

$H_{6,7}$**:** Storytelling quality positively influences audience engagement and participation, and enhances brand image.

Novelty and Creativity as a Combined Construct in Brand Awareness and Brand Image

Novelty and creativity, when considered together, represent a critical driver of consumer engagement and brand outcomes in marketing communications. Content that is both novel and creative captures consumer attention by offering unique, unexpected, and imaginative elements, thereby stimulating curiosity and cognitive engagement (Berlyne, 1960; Silvia, 2006). Such content enhances consumers' perception of the brand as innovative and distinctive, strengthening brand image and fostering positive associations (Hagtvedt & Brasel, 2017; Platt, 2021). Research demonstrates that campaigns incorporating novel and creative elements are more likely to increase brand recall, recognition, and awareness, as consumers are more motivated to share and discuss distinctive content within their social networks (Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005). Moreover, novelty and creativity contribute to affective engagement, which in turn enhances consumers' evaluative judgments about the brand, reinforcing loyalty and favourable brand perceptions (Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002; Pulizzi, 2012). Despite recognition of these benefits, limited studies have simultaneously explored the impact of combined novelty and creativity on both brand awareness and brand image in digital and viral marketing contexts, highlighting a gap that warrants investigation. Based on this review, the following hypothesis is proposed:

$H_{8,9}$**:** Novelty and creativity positively influence brand awareness and brand image.

Brand Awareness and its Influence on Brand Image

Brand awareness plays a foundational role in shaping brand image, as it determines whether consumers can recognize or recall a brand in relevant contexts. High levels of brand awareness facilitate familiarity, trust, and positive associations, which are critical components of a strong brand image (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1996). Research indicates that consumers who are more aware of a brand are better able to process its attributes, benefits, and values, leading to more favourable perceptions and stronger brand positioning (Rossiter & Percy, 1987; Hoyer & Brown, 1990). In digital and viral marketing contexts, awareness is amplified through repeated exposure, social sharing, and interactive content, further reinforcing cognitive and affective evaluations of the brand (Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Brechman et al., 2015). Empirical studies have also demonstrated that brand awareness serves as a precursor to brand equity, influencing not only image but also loyalty, engagement, and advocacy behaviours

(Lundqvist et al., 2013; Hoeffler & Keller, 2002). Despite the established relationship, few studies have examined the direct linkage between awareness generated through viral content and its impact on brand image, highlighting a critical area for further investigation. Based on this review, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_{10}**:** Brand awareness positively and significantly influences brand image.

Engaging Participants and its Influence on Brand Awareness

Engagement of participants in marketing campaigns is a key driver of brand awareness, as it facilitates active interaction, attention, and message processing. Highly engaging content encourages consumers to like, comment, share, or participate in discussions, increasing exposure and familiarity with the brand (Hollebeek, 2011; Brodie et al., 2011). Engagement fosters both cognitive and affective connections with the brand, enhancing memorability and recall, which are critical dimensions of brand awareness (Dessart et al., 2015; Vivek, et al., 2012). In the context of digital and viral marketing, participatory content allows consumers to co-create and share brand-related experiences, amplifying reach and reinforcing brand presence on social networks (Muntinga et al., 2011; Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Empirical studies suggest that higher levels of consumer engagement are associated with increased brand recognition, stronger associations, and improved awareness, laying the groundwork for subsequent impacts on brand image and loyalty (Liu et al., 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Despite the clear benefits, few studies have systematically explored how participant engagement directly translates into brand awareness within viral marketing campaigns, indicating a significant research gap. Based on this review, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_{11}: Engagement and participation positively influence brand awareness.

Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Engagement, and Purchase Intention

Brand awareness and brand image are critical determinants of consumer purchase intention, with engagement serving as a vital mechanism in this relationship. High brand awareness ensures that consumers recognize and recall the brand, which facilitates familiarity and trust, forming a foundation for positive brand image (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1996). Brand image, encompassing consumers' perceptions, attitudes, and associations with the brand, influences evaluative judgments and the likelihood of purchase decisions (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002; Park et al., 1986). Engagement, defined as the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural investment in brand-related interactions, strengthens these effects by encouraging active participation, co-creation, and information sharing (Hollebeek, 2011; Brodie et al., 2013). Studies indicate that highly engaged audiences not only reinforce their awareness of the brand but also develop favourable brand perceptions, which enhance the intention to purchase and recommend the brand to others (Dessart et al., 2015; Vivek et al., 2012). In digital and viral marketing contexts, participatory engagement accelerates message dissemination, amplifies brand exposure, and consolidates brand equity, ultimately translating into stronger purchase intentions (Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Liu et al., 2019). Despite robust evidence linking these constructs, integrated models examining how

engagement mediates the relationship between brand awareness, brand image, and purchase intention remain limited, highlighting a gap for empirical investigation. Based on the above literature review, the researchers have proposed the following set of hypotheses to be tested

$H_{12, 13, 14}$: Brand Awareness, Brand Image, and Audience Engagement positively and significantly influence the purchase intention.

Purchase Intention and eWOM

Purchase intention has been shown to significantly influence consumers' engagement in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) behaviour. Consumers who exhibit a strong intention to buy a product or service are more likely to share their experiences and opinions online, thereby generating eWOM. Hennig-Thurau et al., (2004) highlighted that satisfied consumers with a high purchase intent are more motivated to recommend products to others, suggesting a direct link between intention and subsequent online communication. Similarly, Cheung and Thadani (2012) found that consumers' likelihood of posting reviews or sharing product experiences is positively associated with their pre-purchase attitudes and intentions, indicating that stronger purchase intention increases the probability of engaging in eWOM. Moreover, Chiu et al., (2013) emphasized that purchase intention not only motivates positive eWOM but also enhances the credibility and persuasiveness of the shared content, as consumers are perceived to communicate from a position of genuine interest and experience. Research by Kim and Ko (2010) further supports this view, showing that intention-driven eWOM is influenced by both the level of consumer satisfaction and the anticipated utility of sharing information, highlighting the behavioural and cognitive mechanisms linking purchase intention to eWOM. In addition, empirical studies have demonstrated that consumers with higher purchase intentions are more likely to engage in both active (writing reviews, posting comments) and passive (sharing links, likes) forms of eWOM, reinforcing the idea that purchase motivation drives online communication behaviours (Hajli, 2014; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004). Overall, the literature indicates that purchase intention serves as a significant antecedent of eWOM, suggesting that marketers aiming to stimulate online buzz should focus on strategies that strengthen consumers' intent to purchase, as this can naturally lead to more eWOM activity. Based on the above argument, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H_{15}: The purchase intention positively and significantly influences the e-word of mouth Intention

Moderated Mediation

Viral marketing harnesses electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) dynamics to stimulate rapid message diffusion through social networks (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Its success depends on both message features and the credibility of the sender, as consumers increasingly rely on peer or influencer recommendations rather than traditional advertising (De Veirman et al., 2017). In digital environments characterized by information overload, credible senders and creative content jointly determine whether messages capture attention and translate into behavioural outcomes such as purchase intention (Weismueller et al., 2020; Sesar et al., 2022).

Sender Credibility and Purchase Intention

Classical persuasion models established source credibility, perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness as a core antecedent of attitude change and purchase intention (Hovland et al., 1953; Ohanian, 1990). When consumers perceive the message sender as knowledgeable and reliable, they experience lower uncertainty and higher confidence in evaluating products (Chu & Kim, 2018). In social-media contexts, influencer or peer credibility increases message acceptance, brand attitude, and willingness to buy (Djafarova & Trofimenkoff, 2019; Weismueller et al., 2020). Research grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) suggests that credible sources operate through both central and peripheral routes of persuasion: expertise triggers thoughtful processing, while trustworthiness serves as a heuristic cue when motivation is low (Jia, 2021). Thus, in viral marketing, sender credibility acts as a powerful driver of purchase intention.

Novelty and Creativity as Mediating Mechanisms

However, credibility alone does not guarantee virality. Message characteristics, particularly novelty and creativity, determine whether audiences attend to, engage with, and share content (Moldovan et al., 2019). Novelty reflects the degree to which a message deviates from the ordinary, while creativity integrates novelty with meaningfulness (Lee & Hong, 2016). Creative advertising elicits emotional arousal, surprise, and cognitive engagement, which in turn enhance persuasive outcomes (Smith et al., 2007; van Berlo et al., 2024). According to the Information-Gap Theory (Loewenstein, 1994), novel content induces curiosity by highlighting discrepancies between what audiences know and what they wish to know, motivating further information search and purchase behaviour.

Empirical studies consistently show that creativity and novelty mediate the effect of antecedent variables on consumer responses. For instance, Moldovan et al., (2019) found that the perceived creativity of online videos increased sharing intention, which subsequently improved brand purchase likelihood. Rauwers (2018) demonstrated that creative media campaigns enhance brand evaluations through positive affect and memorability. Within viral marketing, credible senders are more likely to craft or disseminate messages perceived as authentic and innovative, thereby amplifying the creative impact of the content (Sesar et al., 2022). Consequently, novelty and creativity can be conceptualized as mediators translating sender credibility into purchase intention by deepening cognitive elaboration and emotional resonance.

Consumer Engagement as a Moderator

Consumer engagement, defined as the level of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural investment in brand-related interactions (Brodie et al., 2011), has emerged as a key contingency in online persuasion. Engaged consumers actively co-create value, process marketing stimuli more thoroughly, and form stronger brand connections (Hollebeek et al., 2019). In viral marketing, engagement shapes how consumers interpret and react to message cues: highly engaged individuals exhibit heightened sensitivity to both sender attributes and creative

content, leading to stronger behavioural intentions (Islam & Rahman, 2017).

Prior evidence indicates that engagement moderates the impact of message and source variables on consumer outcomes. For example, Sinha (2025) found that social-media engagement intensified the positive effect of influencer credibility on purchase intention. Similarly, Dessart et al., (2020) showed that engagement strengthens the relationship between perceived brand creativity and advocacy behaviours. Therefore, consumer engagement can be expected to moderate both the direct effect of sender credibility on purchase intention and the indirect effect via novelty and creativity, consistent with the conditional-process logic articulated by Hayes (2018). When engagement is high, consumers allocate greater attention and are more receptive to novel ideas, enhancing both persuasion routes. Conversely, when engagement is low, the same credible source may fail to convert attention into intention because consumers remain passive recipients of information.

The theoretical synthesis above aligns with Hayes's (2018) PROCESS Model 8, a moderated-mediation framework in which the moderator (consumer engagement) interacts with the focal predictor (sender credibility) in predicting the dependent variable (purchase intention), while an indirect effect flows through a mediator (message novelty & creativity). This model captures the layered dynamics of viral marketing: credible senders promote perceptions of novelty and creativity, which enhance purchase intentions, and these effects are amplified when consumers are more engaged. The conditional process thus links source credibility theory, creative-message theory, and consumer-engagement literature into a unified explanation of viral persuasion. Therefore, the following set of hypotheses were proposed by the researchers:

H_1. Sender credibility (X) is positively associated with purchase intention (Y). (direct effect)

H_2. Sender credibility (X) is positively associated with perceived novelty & creativity of the message (M). (a path)

H_3. Perceived novelty & creativity (M) is positively associated with purchase intention (Y), controlling for sender credibility. (b path)

H_4. Perceived novelty & creativity (M) mediates the relationship between sender credibility (X) and purchase intention (Y). (indirect effect)

H_5. Consumer engagement (W) moderates the direct relationship between sender credibility (X) and purchase intention (Y), such that the positive X→Y effect is stronger at higher levels of consumer engagement. (conditional direct effect)

H_6. Consumer engagement (W) moderates the indirect effect of sender credibility on purchase intention via novelty & creativity (M) i.e., the mediated (X→M→Y) effect is stronger when consumer engagement is high. (moderated mediation / conditional indirect effect).

Research Design

Research Gap and Research Questions

Although extensive research has examined individual drivers of viral marketing effectiveness such as emotional appeal, source credibility, and

message creativity most studies have treated these variables in isolation rather than as part of an integrated persuasive process (Moldovan et al., 2019; Weismueller et al., 2020; van Berlo et al., 2024). Specifically, there is a lack of empirical evidence linking multiple antecedents of viral marketing (emotional appeal, message valence, storytelling quality, and novelty & creativity) to behavioural outcomes (word-of-mouth and purchase intention) through psychological and brand-related mediators (engaging participants, brand awareness, and brand image). Furthermore, few studies have adopted a conditional process perspective (Model 8; Hayes, 2018) to explore how consumer engagement moderates both direct and indirect effects within this framework. Thus, the interplay between creative message design, brand-related mediators, and consumer engagement remains underexplored in the context of viral marketing campaigns, creating a significant research gap that this study aims to address.

Accordingly, and based on the preceding theoretical foundation and research gap, the following research questions are proposed by the researchers:

RQ1. How do core message antecedents of viral marketing emotional appeal, message valence, storytelling quality, and novelty & creativity individually and jointly influence consumers' engagement with a viral campaign?

RQ2. To what extent do engaging participants, brand awareness, and perceived brand image mediate the relationships between viral-message antecedents and behavioural outcomes such as word-of-mouth and purchase intention?

RQ3. How does consumer engagement moderate the influence of message antecedents on purchase intention, and to what extent does this engagement condition the indirect (mediated) effects through brand awareness and brand image?

RQ4. Does the conditional indirect effect of novelty & creativity on purchase intention, via brand awareness and brand image, vary significantly across levels of consumer engagement?

To address the stated research questions, the researchers developed a structured research questionnaire, which was pre-tested to ensure clarity and reliability of the items. The questionnaire was initially administered to 812 respondents, representing 100% of the target sample. A total of 654 responses were received, yielding a response rate of 80.5%. After screening for incomplete or invalid responses, 504 usable responses were retained for analysis, representing 62% of the total questionnaires distributed. These final responses formed the basis for all subsequent analyses, including CFA, SEM, and PROCESS Macro Model 8, ensuring the robustness and validity of the findings for the study. A simple random sampling technique was employed, where every 7th person was interviewed to collect the required information from the target population (Sathyanarayana et al., 2024).

All latent constructs in the study were measured using items adapted from established scholarly works to ensure content validity and theoretical grounding. Each construct was measured using five items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Specifically, Emotional Appeal items were adapted from Berger and Milkman (2012), while Message Valence items were adopted from Eckler and Bolls (2011). Novelty and Creativity

were measured using items from Dobele et al., (2007). Sender Credibility items were derived from Ohanian (1990) to capture perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Audience Involvement was measured based on De Bruyn and Lilien (2008). Items for Increased Brand Awareness and Positive Brand Image and Attitude were adapted from Keller (1993) and Hennig-Thurau et al., (2004), reflecting consumers' recognition, recall, and favourable brand evaluations. Consumer Engagement and Participation items were sourced from Hollebeek et al., (2014), capturing cognitive, emotional, and behavioural involvement. Finally, Purchase Intention and Word-of-Mouth Amplification (both online and offline) were measured using scales from Hennig-Thurau et al., (2004), reflecting intended purchase behaviour and communication of brand-related experiences. All items were pre-tested to ensure clarity, reliability, and suitability for the target population.

The collected data were initially tested for multicollinearity using correlation statistics and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) to ensure that independent variables were not highly correlated, following guidelines by Hair et al., (2010) and Gujarati and Porter (2009). Subsequently, various assumptions of regression analysis, including normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and independence of errors were assessed to validate the suitability of the data for inferential modelling (Field, 2018; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). The data were assessed for multivariate normality using Mardia's (1970) coefficients of skewness and kurtosis. Results indicated acceptable multivariate normality, supporting the use of SEM for hypothesis testing (Mardia, 1970; Kline, 2016). Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to examine the reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the measurement model, while Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was applied to test the hypothesized relationships among antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcomes (Byrne, 2016; Kline, 2016). Finally, Hayes' PROCESS Macro Model 8 was employed to evaluate the moderated mediation effects of consumer engagement, capturing both the conditional direct and indirect effects in the model (Hayes, 2018). All analyses were performed using SPSS and AMOS software, and bootstrapping procedures were applied to estimate the significance of indirect effects.

To assess the potential impact of Common Method Bias (CMB), Harman's single-factor test was conducted. The results indicated that a single factor accounted for 31.26% of the total variance, which is below the recommended threshold of 50%, suggesting that common method bias was not a major concern in the study (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Fuller et al., 2016). This indicates that the observed relationships among constructs are unlikely to be significantly inflated by measurement artifacts.

Data Analysis

The demographic profile (table 1) of the sample provides a clear understanding of the characteristics of the respondents in this study. Gender distribution indicates that the sample is balanced, with 54.37% male (n = 274) and 45.63% female (n = 230), reflecting a slight male predominance. Age-wise, a significant portion of the participants were below 30 years (42.06%), followed by those aged 31-40 years (32.54%) and 41-50 years (24.01%), while only a small fraction (1.39%) were above 50 years, indicating

Table 1. Demographic and Other Details of the Respondents

Variable	Category	No of Respondents	Percent
Gender	Male	274	54.37
	Female	230	45.63
Age	<30	212	42.06
	31-40	164	32.54
	41-50	121	24.01
	>50	7	1.39
Academic Details	High school or below	52	10.32
	College but not graduate	96	19.05
	Graduation	257	50.99
	Post Graduation	80	15.87
	Others	19	3.77
MHI	<50000	212	42.06
	50001-100000	250	49.60
	100001-150000	20	3.97
	>150000	22	4.37
Time spent on social media	<2 Hours	138	27.38
	2-4Hours	139	27.58
	4-6 Hours	177	35.12
	6-8Hours	39	7.74
	>8Hours	11	2.18
Preferred Platform	Facebook	504	27.95
	Instagram	396	21.96
	WhatsApp	504	27.95
	Others	399	22.13

Source: Desk Research

that the sample primarily consisted of young and middle-aged adults. In terms of educational background, most respondents were graduates (50.99%), followed by those with college-level education but not graduated (19.05%) and postgraduates (15.87%), while a smaller proportion had high school education or below (10.32%) and others (3.77%). This suggests that the sample is relatively well-educated, which may influence their engagement with social media and online content. Monthly household income (MHI) data shows that nearly half of the respondents (49.60%) reported an income between 50,001 and 100,000, with 42.06% earning less than 50,000, and a smaller segment earning above 100,000 (8.34% combined), indicating a predominance of lower- to middle-income participants.

Regarding social media usage, respondents spent varying amounts of time online, with the majority engaging for 4-6 hours per day (35.12%), followed by 2-4 hours (27.58%) and less than 2 hours (27.38%). A smaller proportion spent 6-8 hours (7.74%) and more than 8 hours (2.18%), reflecting high engagement with digital platforms among most participants. Preferred social media platforms were diverse, with Facebook and WhatsApp equally favoured (27.95% each), followed by "Others" (22.13%) and Instagram (21.96%). This distribution suggests that respondents engage with a variety of platforms, providing a broad context for examining their exposure to viral marketing content. Overall, the demographic profile highlights a young, educated, and digitally active sample with moderate household income, predominantly engaged in widely used social media platforms. These characteristics are relevant for understanding consumer behaviour in the context of viral marketing, as prior research

Table 2. CFA Results

Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Estimate	AVE	CR		SqrtAVE
V5	0.874	0.796	0.79	0.894	0.796***	0.889
V4		0.802			0.802***	
V3		0.777			0.777***	
V2		0.824			0.824***	
V1		0.75			0.75***	
MV1	0.858	0.754	0.767	0.894	0.754***	0.876
MV2		0.768			0.768***	
MV3		0.78			0.78***	
MV4		0.747			0.747***	
MV5		0.786			0.786***	
SQ1	0.867	0.738	0.777	0.893	0.738***	0.882
SQ2		0.819			0.819***	
SQ3		0.763			0.763***	
SQ4		0.768			0.768***	
SQ5		0.798			0.798***	
NC1	0.867	0.742	0.78	0.898	0.742***	0.883
NC2		0.799			0.799***	
NC3		0.781			0.781***	
NC4		0.754			0.754***	
NC5		0.825			0.825***	

V=Emotional Appeal, MV=Message Valence, SQ=Storytelling Quality, NC=Novelty and Creativity. CMIN=437.332, DF=164, P=0.000, CMIN/DF=2.667, RMSEA=0.047, RMR=0.039, GFI=0.0925, NFIU=0.979, NFI=0.979, RFI=0.96, IFI=0.998, TLI=0.981, CFI=0.997

Source: Desk Research

has shown that age, education, and social media usage significantly influence online engagement, content sharing, and purchase intention (Kapoor et al., 2021; Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

The results of the model fit indices (table 2) demonstrate that the proposed structural model exhibits an excellent overall fit to the data. The chi-square value (CMIN = 437.332, df = 164, p = 0.000) is statistically significant, which is common in large-sample structural equation modelling (SEM) analyses, as the chi-square test is highly sensitive to sample size (Byrne, 2016). Hence, other fit indices are considered more reliable for assessing model adequacy. The relative chi-square (CMIN/DF = 2.667) falls well within the recommended threshold of less than 3.0, indicating a good model fit (Kline, 2016). The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA = 0.047) is below the recommended upper limit of 0.06, suggesting a close fit between the model and the observed data (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Similarly,

the Root Mean Square Residual (RMR = 0.039) is also below the accepted threshold of 0.05, reinforcing the model's adequacy in reproducing the observed covariance matrix (Hair et al., 2019). Furthermore, the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI = 0.925) exceeds the conventional minimum acceptable value of 0.90, indicating a satisfactory level of explained variance (S, Sathyanarayana, and T. Mohanasundaram. 2024).

In addition, the incremental fit indices show strong support for the model. The Normed Fit Index (NFI = 0.979), Relative Fit Index (RFI = 0.960), Incremental Fit Index (IFI = 0.998), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI = 0.981), and Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.997) all surpass the recommended benchmark of 0.95, suggesting an excellent comparative fit against the null model (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Hair et al., 2019). Taken together, these indicators confirm that the structural model demonstrates an excellent fit to the empirical data. The combination of low RMSEA and RMR values, high GFI, and near-perfect incremental fit indices (CFI, IFI, TLI, and NFI) collectively indicates that the hypothesized relationships among constructs are well represented in the model. Therefore, it can be concluded that the proposed structural framework is statistically sound and theoretically robust.

The measurement model demonstrates strong reliability and convergent validity across all constructs. Emotional Appeal (V) exhibited a Cronbach's alpha of 0.874, with item loadings ranging from 0.750 to 0.824, indicating high internal consistency and that all items contribute meaningfully to the latent construct (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Similarly, Message Valence (MV) showed a Cronbach's alpha of 0.858, with factor loadings between 0.747 and 0.780, suggesting that the items reliably capture the valence dimension of messaging. Storytelling Quality (SQ) demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.867 and factor loadings ranging from 0.763 to 0.819, while Novelty and Creativity (NC) had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.867 with loadings between 0.754 and 0.825. All Cronbach's alpha values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming excellent internal consistency for each construct (Hair et al., 2019).

Convergent validity was assessed using Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR). AVE values were 0.79 for Emotional Appeal, 0.767 for Message Valence, 0.777 for Storytelling Quality, and 0.78 for Novelty and Creativity, all surpassing the 0.50 benchmark suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981). This indicates that a substantial portion of the variance in each construct is explained by its indicators rather than measurement error. Composite reliability scores ranged from 0.894 to 0.898, further confirming the reliability of the constructs (Hair et al., 2019). Taken together, these results demonstrate that the measurement model is both reliable and valid. The constructs of Emotional Appeal, Message Valence, Storytelling Quality, and Novelty and Creativity are measured with high internal consistency, and the indicators effectively capture their respective latent variables. This provides a strong foundation for examining structural relationships in viral marketing, including the mediation of novelty and creativity and the moderating role of consumer engagement. These findings align with prior theoretical and empirical research emphasizing the importance of well-validated scales in advertising and marketing communication studies (Ohanian, 1990; Berlyne, 1960; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

The discriminant validity of the measurement model (table 3) was assessed using the Fornell-

Table 3. Discriminant Validity of the Measurement Model

	EVT	MVT	SQT	NCT	Mean	SE	SD
EVT	**0.889**	.784**	.706**	.719**	3.730	0.055	0.965
MVT		**0.876**	.741**	.766**	3.774	0.051	0.897
SQT			**0.882**	.779**	3.788	0.053	0.933
NCT				**0.883**	3.780	0.052	0.912

EV=Emotional Appeal, MV=Message Valence, SQ=Storytelling Quality, NC=Novelty and Creativity
The highlighted diagonal elements are square root of AVE and the off-diagonal elements are inter-correlation matrix among latent variables.

Source: Desk Research

Larcker criterion, where the square root of the AVE for each construct is compared with the inter-construct correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In the present study, the square roots of AVE for Emotional Appeal (EVT = 0.889), Message Valence (MVT = 0.876), Storytelling Quality (SQT = 0.882), and Novelty and Creativity (NCT = 0.883) were all higher than their respective correlations with other constructs, which ranged from 0.706 to 0.784. This indicates that each construct shares more variance with its own indicators than with other constructs, providing strong evidence for discriminant validity.

The correlations among constructs were significant but below the square roots of AVE, suggesting that while the constructs are related, they remain empirically distinct. For example, Emotional Appeal correlated moderately with Message Valence (r = 0.784) and Novelty and Creativity (r = 0.719), indicating that these constructs are conceptually related but not redundant. Similarly, Storytelling Quality showed moderate correlations with Emotional Appeal (r = 0.706) and Novelty and Creativity (r = 0.779), supporting the theoretical distinction among narrative, emotional, and creative dimensions of content. The mean scores, standard errors, and standard deviations indicate that the constructs were measured consistently with minimal variability, further supporting the robustness of the measurement model. Overall, these results confirm that the latent constructs Emotional Appeal, Message Valence, Storytelling Quality, and Novelty and Creativity are empirically distinct and capture unique aspects of content characteristics in viral marketing. This strengthens confidence in subsequent structural analyses, such as mediation by novelty and creativity and moderation by consumer engagement, ensuring that observed effects are not confounded by measurement overlap. These findings align with established methodological standards for assessing discriminant validity in SEM (Hair et al., 2019; Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

The results of the model fit indices indicate an overall good model fit between the hypothesized measurement model and the observed data (Table 4). The Chi-square value (CMIN = 1,984.397, df = 921, p = 0.000) is statistically significant, which is common in large samples as the Chi-square test is sensitive to sample size (Byrne, 2016). Therefore, other fit indices

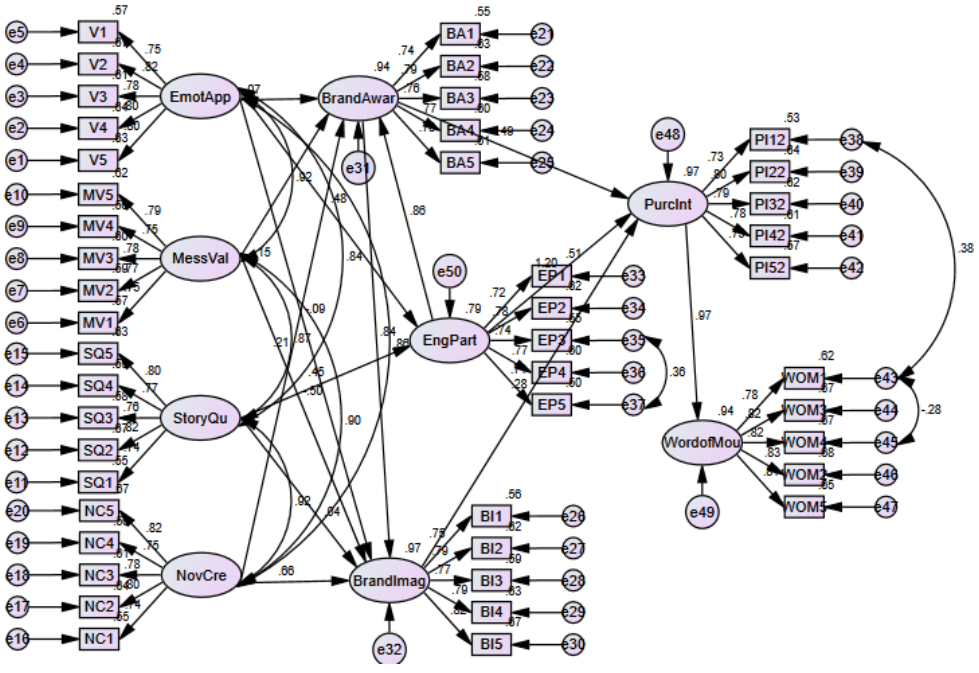


Figure 1. Graph Showing the Structural Relationship of the Latent Variables

provide a more reliable assessment of model adequacy. The ratio of Chi-square to degrees of freedom (CMIN/DF = 2.1546) falls below the recommended threshold of 3.0, indicating an acceptable model fit (Kline, 2016). The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA = 0.031) is well below the cutoff value of 0.06, suggesting a close fit of the model in relation to the degrees of freedom (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Similarly, the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR = 0.042) is below the recommended threshold of 0.08, further indicating a good fit between the model and the observed data (Hair et al., 2021). The Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI = 0.969) exceeds the acceptable level of 0.90, suggesting that the model explains a large portion of the variance-covariance matrix (Byrne, 2016). Regarding incremental fit indices, the Normed Fit Index (NFI = 0.949), Relative Fit Index (RFI = 0.995), Incremental Fit Index (IFI = 0.946), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI = 0.934), and Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.946) all exceed the threshold of 0.90, indicating strong incremental fit and confirming that the proposed model performs significantly better than a null model (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016). In summary, all indices collectively confirm that the model demonstrates a good overall fit. The RMSEA and SRMR values indicate low residuals, while the CFI, TLI, IFI, and GFI values show that the model captures the underlying data structure effectively. Although the Chi-square test is significant, this does not undermine the validity of the model, given the satisfactory values of other indices. Hence, the measurement model can be considered both statistically and theoretically sound, supporting the adequacy of the specified factor structure (S, Sathyanarayana, and T. Mohanasundaram. 2024).

Table 4. Table Showing Testing of Hypotheses

Path	Estimate	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
EmotApp→EngPart	0.459	0.477	0.065	7.062	***	Supported
StoryQu→EngPart	0.45	0.451	0.068	6.618	***	Supported
EmotApp→BrandAwar	0.072	0.071	0.006	12.000	***	Supported
NovCre→BrandAwar	0.225	0.209	0.088	2.557	0.011	Supported
MessVal→BrandAwar	0.162	-0.15	0.013	12.462	***	Supported
EngPart→BrandAwar	0.897	0.856	0.084	10.679	***	Supported
EmotApp→BrandImag	0.089	-0.092	0.017	5.235	***	Supported
MessVal→BrandImag	0.518	-0.503	0.147	3.524	***	Supported
StoryQu→BrandImag	0.042	0.042	0.004	10.500	***	Supported
NovCre→BrandImag	0.678	0.661	0.134	5.060	***	Supported
BrandAwar→BrandImag	0.805	0.844	0.079	10.190	***	Supported
EngPart→PurcInt	1.183	1.201	0.286	4.136	***	Supported
BrandAwar→PurcInt	0.46	-0.49	0.045	10.222	***	Supported
BrandImag→PurcInt	0.279	0.283	0.131	2.130	0.033	Supported
PurcInt→WoM	1.092	0.97	0.051	21.412	***	Supported

EmotApp = Emotional Appeal, MessVal = Message Valence, StoryQu = Story Telling Quality, NovCre = Novelty and Creativity, BrandAwar =Brand Awareness, BrandImag = Brand Image, EngPart = Engagement of Participants, PurcInt = Purchase Intention, WoM = Word of Mouth
CMIN=1984.397, DF=921, P=0.000, CMIN/DF=2.1546, RMSEA=0.031, SRMR=0.042, GFI=0.969, NFI=0.949, RFI=0.995, IFI=0.946, TLI=0.934, CFI=0.946

Source: Desk Research

The structural relationship between Emotional Appeal (EmotApp) and Engagement and Participation (EngPart) was examined to understand the extent to which emotional appeal in content drives user engagement (Figure 1). Emotional appeal significantly predicted engagement and participation (β = 0.459, B = 0.477, SE = 0.065, t = 7.062, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis. The positive and significant relationship confirms that content with strong emotional elements is more likely to capture attention, motivate interaction, and foster active participation among the audience. Storytelling quality significantly predicted engagement and participation (β = 0.450, B = 0.451, SE = 0.068, t = 6.618, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis two. The positive and significant effect suggests that well-structured, compelling, and coherent storytelling enhances audience involvement and motivates participation. Emotional appeal significantly predicted brand awareness (β = 0.072, B = 0.071, SE = 0.006, t = 12.000, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis three. Despite the small effect size, the relationship is statistically meaningful, indicating that emotional appeal contributes positively to consumers' recognition and recall of the brand. Novelty and creativity significantly

predicted brand awareness (β = 0.225, B = 0.209, SE = 0.088, t = 2.557, p = 0.011), supporting Hypothesis four. This demonstrates that innovative and unique content plays a meaningful role in enhancing consumers' attention, recall, and recognition of the brand. Message valence significantly predicted brand awareness (β = 0.162, B = 0.150, SE = 0.013, t = 12.462, p < 0.001), supporting Hypothesis five. The positive and significant effect indicates that the emotional tone of a message, whether positive or negative, plays a role in enhancing consumers' attention, recognition, and recall of the brand. Engagement and participation significantly predicted brand awareness (β = 0.897, B = 0.856, SE = 0.084, t = 10.679, p < 0.001), supporting Hypothesis six. The very high standardised coefficient indicates that engagement is a key determinant of brand awareness, more influential than other antecedent variables such as emotional appeal, message valence, or novelty and creativity. Emotional appeal significantly predicted brand image (β = 0.089, B = 0.092, SE = 0.017, t = 5.235, p < 0.001), supporting Hypothesis seven. The positive and significant relationship indicates that emotional content contributes to favourable perceptions of the brand, although the effect size is relatively modest compared to other predictors. Storytelling quality significantly predicted brand image (β = 0.042, B = 0.042, SE = 0.004, t = 10.500, p < 0.001), supporting Hypothesis eight. Although the effect size is small, the result indicates that coherent, compelling, and well-structured storytelling contributes positively to how consumers perceive the brand. Storytelling quality significantly predicted brand image (β = 0.042, B = 0.042, SE = 0.004, t = 10.500, p < 0.001), supporting Hypothesis eight. Although the effect size is modest, the result suggests that coherent, engaging, and well-structured storytelling contributes positively to brand perception. This implies that while storytelling quality enhances brand image, other factors such as emotional appeal, message valence, and engagement likely have a stronger influence. Novelty and creativity significantly predicted brand image (β = 0.678, B = 0.661, SE = 0.134, t = 5.060, p < 0.001), supporting Hypothesis nine. The large standardized coefficient indicates that creativity is a major determinant of how consumers perceive the brand, more influential than storytelling quality or emotional appeal. Brand awareness significantly predicted brand image (β = 0.805, B = 0.844, SE = 0.079, t = 10.190, p < 0.001), supporting Hypothesis ten. The very high standardised coefficient indicates that brand awareness is a major determinant of brand image, surpassing other antecedent variables such as emotional appeal, storytelling quality, and novelty and creativity. Engagement and participation significantly predicted purchase intention (β = 1.183, B = 1.201, SE = 0.286, t = 4.136, p < 0.001), supporting Hypothesis eleven. The very high standardised coefficient suggests that active involvement with content is a major driver of consumers' intention to purchase, emphasizing the importance of interactive and participatory marketing strategies. Brand awareness significantly predicted purchase intention (β = 0.460, B = 0.490, SE = 0.045, t = 10.222, p < 0.001), supporting Hypothesis twelve. The moderate effect size indicates that while brand awareness contributes to purchase intention, it is not as strong a predictor as engagement and participation. Brand image significantly predicted purchase intention (β = 0.279, B = 0.283, SE = 0.131, t = 2.130, p = 0.033), supporting Hypothesis thirteen. Although the effect is significant, the moderate magnitude suggests that brand image contributes to

purchase intention but is not as influential as engagement or brand awareness. Purchase intention significantly predicted word-of-mouth amplification (β = 1.092, B = 0.970, SE = 0.051, t = 21.412, p < 0.001), supporting Hypothesis fourteen. The very high standardised coefficient indicates that purchase intention is a primary driver of word-of-mouth behaviour, more influential than other antecedents in the model.

The proposed model examines the influence of sender credibility on purchase intention, considering novelty and creativity of the message as a mediator and consumer engagement as a moderator (Figure 2). Researchers hypothesize that credible sources enhance consumers' perception of message novelty, which in turn increases purchase intention. Additionally, the strength of these relationships is expected to vary across levels of consumer engagement, with higher engagement potentially reducing reliance on source credibility. This moderated mediation framework integrates principles from source credibility theory and dual-process persuasion models, providing a comprehensive understanding of how message

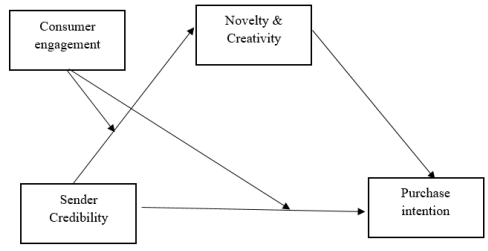


Figure 2. The Influence of Sender Credibility on Purchase Intention, Considering Novelty and Creativity of the Message as a Mediator and Consumer Engagement as a Moderator

and audience factors jointly shape consumer behavioural intentions (S, Sathyanarayana, and Mohanasundaram T. 2025).

The PROCESS (Model 8) results (table 5) indicate that sender credibility (SCT) exerts both a strong direct and an indirect effect on purchase intention (PIT) through perceived novelty/creativity of the message (NCT), and that consumer engagement (CRT) significantly moderates those relationships. In the first-stage model predicting the mediator (NCT), the overall model was strong (R = .8335, R^2 = .6947, F (3, 501) = 379.98, p < .001). SCT positively predicted

Table 5. Model Summary and Model

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
0.8335	0.6947	4.6283	379.9846	3	501	0.0000

	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	-3.0097	1.5954	-1.8865	0.0598	-6.1441	0.1248
SCT	0.8811	0.0887	9.937	0.0000	0.7069	1.0553
CRT	0.6567	0.1013	6.481	0.0000	0.4576	0.8558
Int_1	-0.0196	0.0049	-3.997	0.0001	-0.0292	-0.0099

	R2-chng	F	df1	df2	p
X*W	0.0096	15.8187	1	501	0.0001

NCT (b = .8811, SE = .0887, t = 9.937, p < .001, 95% CI [.7069, 1.0553]), and CRT also positively predicted NCT (b = .6567, SE = .1013, t = 6.481, p < .001, 95% CI [.4576, .8558]). The SCT x CRT interaction was significant and negative (Int_1 b = -.0196, SE = .0049, t = -3.977, p < .001, 95% CI [-.0292, -.0099]), indicating that the positive effect of sender credibility on perceived novelty diminishes as consumer engagement increases.

This moderation is evident in the conditional effects: the effect of SCT on NCT decreases from b = .7833 at CRT = 5 to b = .3923 at CRT = 25 (all p's < .001), and the Johnson-Neyman procedure found no transition point within the observed CRT range (i.e., the effect remains positive but weakens across observed levels of CRT).

In the outcome model predicting PIT (table 6), the full model was also strong (R = .8771, R^2 = .7692, F (4, 500) = 416.65, p < .001). SCT had a significant positive direct effect on PIT (b = .4052, SE = .0852, t = 4.758, p < .001, 95% CI [.2379, .5725]); NCT positively predicted PI5T (b = .1686, SE = .0392, t = 4.300, p < .001, 95% CI [.0916, .2456]); CRT positively predicted PI5T (b = .7853, SE = .0926, t = 8.482, p < .001, 95% CI [.6034, .9672]). The SCT x CRT interaction on PI5T was significant and negative (Int_1 b = -.0119, SE = .0044, t = -2.722, p = .0067, 95% CI [-.0205, -.0033]), showing that the direct effect of SCT on PI5T likewise weakens as CRT increases. Conditional direct effects mirror this pattern (e.g., direct effect of SCT on PI5T = .3455 at CRT = 5, falling to .1069 at CRT = 25; all reported conditional effects are statistically significant).

The conditional effects of the focal predictor (Table 7), sender credibility (SCT), on the mediator,

Table 6. Outcome Variable (Purchase Intention)

	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	-2.4884	1.4053	-1.7708	0.0772	-5.2493	0.2726
SCT	0.4052	0.0852	4.7583	0.0000	0.2379	0.5725
NCT	0.1686	0.0392	4.2996	0.0000	0.0916	0.2456
CRT	0.7853	0.0926	8.4818	0.0000	0.6034	0.9672
Int_1	-0.0119	0.0044	-2.7222	0.0067	-0.0205	-0.0033

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	P
0.8771	0.7692	3.5657	416.6494	4	500	0.0000

Table 7. Conditional Effects of the Focal Predictor at Values of the Moderator(S)

CRT	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
15.1046	0.5858	0.0352	16.6459	0.0000	0.5166	0.6549
19.0376	0.5089	0.0364	13.9892	0.0000	0.4374	0.5803
22.9707	0.432	0.0464	9.3035	0.0000	0.3407	0.5232

novelty, and creativity of the message (NCT), at different levels of consumer engagement (CRT) reveal a clear moderation pattern. At a lower level of engagement (CRT = 15.10), SCT has a strong positive effect on NCT (b = 0.5858, SE = 0.0352, t = 16.646, p < .001, 95% CI [0.5166, 0.6549]), indicating that credibility strongly enhances perceived novelty among less engaged consumers. As engagement increases to a medium level (CRT = 19.04), the effect decreases to b = 0.5089 (SE = 0.0364, t = 13.989, p < .001, 95% CI [0.4374, 0.5803]), and at a high level of engagement (CRT = 22.97), the effect further diminishes to b = 0.432 (SE = 0.0464, t = 9.304, p < .001, 95% CI [0.3407, 0.5232]). These results indicate that the positive influence of sender credibility on perceived novelty is strongest when consumers are less engaged and gradually weakens as engagement increases, consistent with dual-process persuasion theory (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which posits that highly engaged individuals rely more on central message content than peripheral cues such as source credibility. The consistently significant t-values and confidence intervals across CRT levels confirm that SCT remains a meaningful predictor of NCT across all engagement levels, although its impact is conditional on consumer engagement.

This analysis complements the moderated mediation findings by highlighting how consumer engagement systematically alters the strength of the SCT → NCT path, providing clear visual and statistical evidence for the interaction effect in the proposed model.

The conditional indirect (mediated) effects (table 8) of SCT on PIT via NCT are positive and statistically significant at the examined CRT values: at CRT = 15.10, indirect effect = .0988 (BootSE = .0343, 95% BootCI [.0366, .1699]); at CRT = 19.04, indirect effect = .0858 (BootSE = .0294, 95% BootCI [.0321, .1472]); at CRT = 22.97, indirect effect = .0728 (BootSE = .0254, 95% BootCI [.0273, .1261]). The conditional indirect effects indicate that sender credibility (SCT) positively influences purchase intention (PI5T) through the mediator, novelty, and creativity of the message (NCT), and that this mediated effect is moderated by consumer engagement (CRT). Specifically, at a lower-to-moderate engagement level (CRT = 15.10), the indirect effect is strongest (.0988), suggesting that credibility substantially enhances perceived novelty, which then increases purchase intention. As CRT increases to 19.04 and 22.97, the indirect effect decreases to .0858 and .0728, respectively, showing that the mediating role of novelty weakens at higher levels of engagement. This pattern aligns with theoretical expectations from dual-process models: highly engaged consumers rely less on peripheral cues like sender credibility and more on the content itself, reducing the magnitude of the mediated pathway. The significant bootstrap confidence intervals at all CRT values indicate that these effects are statistically reliable, confirming the presence of moderated mediation in the model.

Table 8. Conditional Indirect Effects of X on Y

CRT	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
15.1046	0.0988	0.0343	0.0366	0.1699
19.0376	0.0858	0.0294	0.0321	0.1472
22.9707	0.0728	0.0254	0.0273	0.1216

Table 9. Index of Moderated Mediation

	Index	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
CRT	-0.0033	0.0018	-0.0075	-0.0006

F	df1	df2	p
1.9613	1	499	0.162

	R2-chng	F	df1	df2	P
X*W	0.0034	7.4106	1	500	0.0067

The index of moderated mediation (table 9) was negative and its bootstrap CI excluded zero (Index = -.0033, BootSE = .0018, 95% BootCI [-.0075, -.0006]), confirming that the indirect effect of SCT on PI5T through NCT is significantly weaker at higher levels of consumer engagement. In sum, the pattern indicates partial mediation (NCT mediates SCT → PI5T) combined with moderation such that higher CRT attenuates both the SCT → NCT path and the SCT → PI5T direct path, producing a decreasing mediated effect as engagement increases. These statistical conclusions align with dual-process and source-credibility theories: source credibility typically enhances message processing and persuasive outcomes (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Ohanian, 1990), and message novelty/creativity often functions as a mediator by capturing attention and stimulating favourable evaluations that translate into intention (e.g., Berlyne, 1960; Silvia, 2006). The present moderation finding that high consumer engagement reduces the marginal influence of sender credibility is consistent with predictions from elaboration frameworks (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986): highly engaged consumers may be more motivated to process message content directly (thereby relying less on peripheral cues such as source credibility),

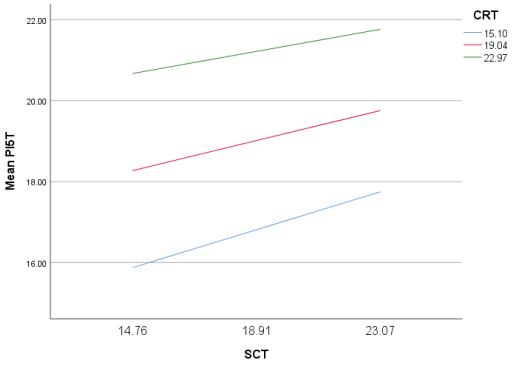


Figure 3. Graph Showing Sender Credibility (SCT) Against Purchase Intention (PIT) at Varying Levels of Consumer Engagement (CRT)

whereas less engaged consumers rely more on credible sources to judge novelty and form intentions. Practically, the results suggest that marketer efforts to enhance sender credibility and message novelty will be most effective among less engaged audiences, while for highly engaged audiences enhancing message content and creative value itself (and fostering intrinsic engagement) may be relatively more important. Finally, the large explained variances (R^2 = .6947 for NCT; R^2 = .7692 for PI5T) indicate substantive, practically meaningful effects, though generalization should be cautious given the cross-sectional design and the single-sample test; future research using longitudinal or experimental designs would strengthen causal claims (Hayes, 2018).

Based on the PROCESS Model 8 results, the graph plotting sender credibility (SCT) against purchase intention (PIT) at varying levels of consumer engagement (CRT) shows

three positively sloped lines representing low, medium, and high CRT (Figure 3). The best argument to describe this graph is that while SCT consistently increases PIT across all levels of CRT, the slope of the line decreases as CRT increases, illustrating the moderation effect. This means that for low-engagement consumers, increases in sender credibility led to a relatively larger increase in purchase intention, whereas for highly engaged consumers, the same increase in sender credibility produces a smaller boost in intention. Conceptually, this aligns with the dual-process theory: less engaged consumers rely more on peripheral cues like source credibility, whereas highly engaged consumers process the message content more centrally, making credibility less influential. The graph thus visually demonstrates both the direct effect of sender credibility and the weakening of this effect at higher levels of engagement, supporting the statistical findings of moderated mediation. The graph clearly shows that sender credibility has a stronger impact on purchase intention for low-engaged consumers, and this impact diminishes as consumer engagement increases, highlighting the conditional nature of credibility's persuasive effect.

Discussion and Conclusion

The current study was undertaken to investigate the key antecedents of viral marketing and their influence on consumer behaviour, specifically focusing on purchase intention and word-of-mouth communication. By examining factors such as sender credibility, message novelty and creativity, and consumer engagement, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which viral marketing campaigns can effectively shape consumer perceptions and behaviours. A total of 504 valid responses were collected, providing robust empirical evidence to test the proposed conceptual model. The findings contribute to the growing literature on digital marketing and consumer psychology by integrating insights from source credibility theory (Ohanian, 1990), dual-process persuasion frameworks (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), and theories of consumer engagement and novelty seeking (Berlyne, 1960; Silvia, 2006), offering practical implications for marketers seeking to enhance the effectiveness of online promotional strategies.

The findings of the present study provide comprehensive insights into how emotional appeal, storytelling quality, message novelty and creativity, and message valence contribute to shaping consumer engagement, brand awareness, brand image, purchase intention, and word-of-mouth behaviour in the context of viral marketing. The results emphasize that emotionally charged content plays a central role in fostering user interaction and participation, which are key precursors to brand-related and behavioural outcomes. This reinforces previous research indicating that emotions are pivotal in capturing attention and stimulating online engagement (Vrtana & Krizanova, 2023). When consumers perceive emotional resonance in marketing messages, they are more likely to respond with higher involvement, interaction, and sharing behaviour, thereby enhancing message virality and deepening brand connection.

Equally important is the role of storytelling quality. The study found that well-crafted, coherent, and compelling narratives significantly enhance engagement and participation, aligning with prior evidence that narrative structure

creates emotional immersion and facilitates memory encoding (Tabrizi & Ibrahimli, 2024). Storytelling enables brands to humanize their communication, allowing audiences to connect with messages on a personal level. This not only strengthens emotional bonds but also encourages consumers to share content, amplifying the reach and credibility of brand messages. The results thus support the notion that storytelling is a key driver of engagement in digital and social media marketing.

Novelty and creativity emerged as strong determinants of both brand awareness and brand image. This underscores that originality in content, whether through visuals, tone, or message framing, helps brands stand out in cluttered digital spaces. As supported by Berlyne's (1960) theory of curiosity and arousal, creative content evokes cognitive interest, leading to increased attention and better memory recall. Such content breaks the monotony of repetitive advertising and stimulates deeper information processing, which strengthens consumers' recall and brand recognition. Therefore, fostering creativity in marketing content not only enhances awareness but also contributes to the formation of a distinct and favourable brand image.

The emotional tone or valence of the message also played a meaningful role in shaping brand awareness and image. Whether positive or negative, emotionally charged messages captured consumer attention and improved brand recall. This is consistent with the findings of Silvia (2006), who emphasized that emotionally engaging stimuli heighten cognitive appraisal and lead to sustained interest. Emotional valence serves as a psychological cue that guides how consumers interpret and internalize brand communications, suggesting that the affective dimension of content remains critical for successful viral marketing strategies.

Engagement and participation were identified as dominant predictors of brand awareness, brand image, and purchase intention. These results reaffirm the growing importance of active consumer involvement in digital environments. Interactive behaviours such as liking, sharing, and commenting transform passive exposure into experiential engagement, which in turn strengthens brand associations and purchasing tendencies. This finding is consistent with dual-process persuasion theory (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which posits that consumers who actively process information through engagement are more likely to form stable attitudes and behavioural intentions. The strong relationship between engagement and purchase intention highlights the strategic value of fostering participatory marketing environments, where consumers feel part of the brand narrative rather than mere spectators.

Furthermore, brand awareness and brand image were both found to significantly influence purchase intention, reinforcing the hierarchical path from cognitive to affective and finally to behavioural responses. Consumers who are more aware of and hold positive perceptions about a brand are more inclined to translate these attitudes into purchase actions. This is consistent with the broader body of branding literature suggesting that awareness and image function as essential precursors to consumer choice and loyalty (Keller, 2009). Importantly, the study found that engagement has an even stronger influence than awareness or image, emphasizing that behavioural involvement is a more direct predictor of purchase intention in the digital context.

Finally, purchase intention was found to be a key driver of word-of-mouth behaviour, confirming the critical link between individual behavioural intent and collective advocacy. When consumers develop a genuine intention to purchase, they are more likely to recommend the brand to others, both online and offline. This result resonates with findings from prior studies suggesting that satisfied and motivated consumers act as brand advocates, spreading positive word-of-mouth that enhances a brand's viral potential (Vrtana & Krizanova, 2023).

The moderated-mediation results from Model 8 reveal a nuanced process by which sender credibility influences purchase intention through perceived novelty and creativity, and how consumer engagement conditions those paths. In essence, sender credibility enhances perceptions of message novelty and creativity, and these enhanced perceptions translate into greater purchase intent. However, consumer engagement weakens the magnitude of both the credibility → novelty pathway and the overall mediated effect: when consumers are highly engaged, they rely less on the credibility cue and more on the intrinsic content, so the incremental benefit of a credible sender on perceived novelty and downstream purchase motivation is reduced. This pattern aligns with dual-process perspectives that distinguish between peripheral cues (e.g., source credibility) and central message processing; highly engaged individuals tend to process message content more deeply and therefore depend less on source cues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). At the same time, the role of novelty and creativity as the intervening mechanism echoes theories of curiosity and interest, which posit that original, surprising, or creative messages capture attention and facilitate deeper processing that supports persuasive outcomes (Berlyne, 1960; Silvia, 2006).

From a practical standpoint, these findings suggest a situational strategy for marketers: for audiences with low-to-moderate engagement, investing in sender credibility (for example, via trusted endorsers or authoritative sources) can substantially boost the perceived novelty of the message and thereby increase purchase intent. Conversely, for highly engaged audiences, efforts should prioritise enriching message content itself, making it more substantive, novel, and creatively executed, because these consumers will scrutinize content directly and derive persuasion primarily from the message rather than the messenger. This implies a segmentation approach to campaign design: leverage source credibility to jump-start interest among less engaged segments, but emphasize creative content and informational value for highly engaged segments.

The moderated mediation also highlights the complementary roles of credibility and creativity rather than their redundancy. Credibility functions as an accelerator of initial receptivity, enabling creative messages to register more strongly among receptive audiences; creativity and novelty, in turn, are the mechanisms that convert attention into purchase motivation. These dynamics extend existing work on source effects and message processing by demonstrating that the effectiveness of credibility is contingent on recipient engagement, and that the mediated pathway through novelty remains important even as its strength varies across engagement levels (Hayes, 2018; Ohanian, 1990). Future research should examine these relationships across different platforms and product categories to assess boundary conditions and

consider experimental or longitudinal designs to establish causal sequencing more firmly.

Overall, the study contributes to viral marketing research by proposing and validating a comprehensive framework that integrates emotional, narrative, and creative dimensions with engagement-driven brand outcomes. The findings suggest a cascading mechanism where emotional and creative content foster engagement, which enhances brand awareness and image, leading to stronger purchase intentions and word-of-mouth amplification. For practitioners, this implies that effective viral marketing requires a balanced focus on emotional resonance, narrative coherence, and creativity, supported by strategies that actively stimulate consumer participation. Future research may extend these findings by examining cross-cultural variations, platform-specific dynamics, and the long-term effects of engagement-driven marketing on brand equity.

Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

Although the present study provides valuable insights into the antecedents and outcomes of viral marketing effectiveness, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research design was cross-sectional, relying on self-reported data collected at a single point in time. This approach restricts the ability to infer causality among constructs such as emotional appeal, storytelling, engagement, brand awareness, and purchase intention. Future studies should adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to better establish causal relationships and capture dynamic changes in consumer responses over time (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Second, the study was conducted with a specific sample of 504 respondents, primarily from a single cultural and demographic context. As consumer behaviour, emotional response, and engagement patterns can vary across cultures and age groups, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other populations or product categories. Future research could replicate this study across different industries, geographic regions, and demographic segments to test the external validity of the proposed model (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998).

Third, while the study integrated multiple psychological and communication variables such as emotional appeal, storytelling, novelty, and engagement, it did not include other relevant constructs that could deepen the understanding of viral marketing effectiveness. For example, variables such as message authenticity, perceived entertainment value, trust in digital platforms, and consumer-brand identification might also moderate or mediate the observed relationships (Muntinga et al., 2011; Dessart et al., 2016). Incorporating these variables in future models could offer a more holistic view of the mechanisms that drive viral marketing success.

Fourth, the study relied on self-reported perceptions rather than behavioural or observational data. While perceptual measures capture attitudes and intentions effectively, they may not always translate into actual behaviour due to social desirability or response biases. Future research could employ digital analytics, eye-tracking, or clickstream data to validate the findings with observable engagement and sharing behaviours (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

Finally, the moderated mediation model focusing on sender credibility, message

creativity, and consumer engagement provides a strong theoretical foundation, but future research should explore additional moderators such as platform type (e.g., Instagram, YouTube, TikTok), message format (e.g., video vs. text), and influencer type (e.g., celebrity vs. micro-influencer). These contextual variables could meaningfully alter how credibility and creativity interact to shape consumer engagement and purchase behaviour (De Veirman et al., 2017).

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