

Viral Marketing: An Infancy Analysis of New Products

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Introduction

Digital platforms have fundamentally restructured how new products reach consumers. Viral marketing the strategy of using peer sharing, social media dynamics, and influencer networks to propagate brand messages has emerged as a defining promotional force, particularly during a product's infancy stage. Unlike conventional advertising, viral approaches leverage organic user participation, compressing awareness cycles from months to hours.

Yet outcomes vary dramatically. Labubu dolls by Pop Mart generated revenue growth exceeding 600% in early 2025 through community-driven virality. PRIME Hydration, co-founded by Logan Paul and KSI, reached \$1.2 billion in sales by 2023 before declining 42% year-on-year by 2025. Fidget Spinners surged globally then vanished almost instantly. Kinder Joy's Harry Potter edition used nostalgia to generate ₹150 crore in Indian sales, only to fade post-campaign. These contrasting trajectories raise a central question: does viral marketing durably drive consumer action, or does it merely create short-lived attention?

Literature Review

Kaplan and Haenlein (2011) established that virality is not incidental but results from deliberate alignment between platform design, audience psychology, and authentic content strategy. Dobele et al. (2007) identified humour, joy, and surprise as the primary emotional triggers that motivate sharing, while Berger and Milkman (2012) extended this by demonstrating that high-arousal emotions both positive (awe, excitement) and negative (anger) drive content diffusion far more effectively than neutral information.

Southgate (2017) argued that authenticity and values-alignment are decisive determinants of whether a campaign builds lasting brand equity or merely fleeting visibility. Ferguson (2008) cautioned against equating reach with effectiveness, noting that high-visibility campaigns frequently fail to generate proportionate purchasing action. Porter and Golan (2006) found that while viral content excels at entertainment and engagement, it often underperforms traditional advertising in stimulating purchase intent without complementary brand-building efforts.

Puriwat and Tripopsakul (2021) demonstrated that creative, emotionally resonant viral content strengthens brand preference and recall through peer-to-peer trust amplification. Freberg et al. (2011) showed that influencer authenticity and relatability outperform follower count as predictors of campaign effectiveness. Hinz et al. (2011) established that strategic early-adopter seeding substantially amplifies viral reach. Berger's (2013) STEPPS framework Social Currency, Triggers, Emotion, Public, Practical Value, Stories remains the most widely cited organising model for viral content design.

More recent scholarship signals emerging concerns. Theodorakopoulos et al. (2025) highlighted both the precision gains and ethical risks of AI-powered viral targeting. Singh et al. (2025) found Gen Z consumers acutely sensitive to manipulative or inauthentic messaging. Gibreel et al. (2025), in a bibliometric review spanning two decades, confirmed that while emotional triggers and platform effects have been extensively studied, the long-term retention and repeat-purchase consequences of virality remain under-researched.

Research Gap

Despite substantial scholarly output, three gaps persist. First, while awareness generation is widely acknowledged as a viral marketing outcome, the statistical relationship between awareness intensity and actual purchase behaviour in new product contexts has not been rigorously tested in the Indian demographic. Second, the relative contributions of perception quality versus awareness quantity as predictors of consumer action remain insufficiently differentiated in the literature. Third, the trial-acceleration mechanism whereby viral exposure shortens consumer decision timelines has received limited empirical attention despite its particular commercial significance at the product infancy stage. This study directly addresses all three gaps.

Objectives Of the Study

- To examine whether viral marketing campaigns generate consumer awareness that significantly predicts purchase behaviour.
- To investigate how consumer perception and belief formation mediate the relationship between viral marketing exposure and purchasing decisions.
- To determine whether viral marketing accelerates product trial intent, and whether such intent constitutes a significant driver of purchase action.

Formulation Of Hypotheses

Main Hypothesis

H₀: Viral marketing factors (awareness, perception, trial intent) have no significant relationship with consumer purchase behaviour.

H₁: Viral marketing factors have a significant relationship with consumer purchase behaviour.

Sub-Hypotheses

H₀₁ / H₁₁: Campaign-driven awareness has no / a significant impact on purchase behaviour.

H₀₂ / H₁₂: Perception and belief formation has no / a significant impact on purchase behaviour.

H₀₃ / H₁₃: Trial intent has no / a significant impact on purchase behaviour.

Research Design & Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive-analytical, cross-sectional design was adopted. The descriptive component profiles consumer attitudes toward viral marketing; the analytical component tests statistical associations using the Chi-square Test of Independence at $\alpha = 0.05$.

Research Approach & Sample

A quantitative approach was followed using a structured 25-item questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. Non-probability purposive sampling targeted 100 urban Indian consumers aged 18–35 (Millennials and Gen Z) the demographic most consistently exposed to viral campaigns. The sample included students, early-career professionals, and self-employed individuals active on Instagram, YouTube, and X.

Variables & Measurement

Variable	Type	Instrument Item
Purchasing Behaviour	Dependent	Q13: Purchased viral product? (Yes/No)
Campaign Awareness	Independent	Q12: Viral campaigns build awareness? (4-pt scale)
Perception & Belief	Independent	Q10: Perception of viral products? (4-pt scale)
Trial Intent	Independent	Q18: Viral marketing accelerates trial? (5-pt Likert)

Attitudinal items used a five-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree). Data was analysed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulation, and Chi-square testing in Microsoft Excel and SPSS.

Data Analysis & Interpretation

H₁ — Awareness vs. Purchase Behaviour

Awareness Level	Purchased	Not Purchased	Total
To a great extent	30	5	35
To some extent	30	13	43
Neutral	14	4	18
Very little	2	2	4
Total	76	24	100

Statistic	Value
χ^2 Calculated	4.240
df	3
χ^2 Critical ($\alpha=0.05$)	7.815
p-value	0.24
Decision	Fail to Reject H₀

$\chi^2=4.240 < 7.815$ critical; $p=0.24 > 0.05$. H_{01} is accepted. Awareness frequency does not significantly predict purchase behaviour exposure alone is insufficient to drive consumer action.

H_2 — Perception vs. Purchase Behaviour

Perception	Purchased	Not Purchased	Total
Very Positive	16	0	16
Positive	28	12	40
Neutral	32	10	42
Negative	0	2	2
Total	76	24	100

Statistic	Value
χ^2 Calculated	12.162
df	3
χ^2 Critical ($\alpha=0.05$)	7.815
p-value	0.007
Decision	Reject H_0 ✓

$\chi^2=12.162 > 7.815$; $p=0.007 < 0.05$. H_{02} is rejected. Consumers who perceive viral campaigns positively are significantly more likely to purchase notably, all 16 'Very Positive' respondents had made viral-influenced purchases.

H_3 — Trial Intent vs. Purchase Behaviour

Trial Intent	Purchased	Not Purchased	Total
Strongly Agree	20	2	22
Agree	28	8	36
Neutral	24	10	34
Disagree	4	3	7
Str. Disagree	0	1	1
Total	76	24	100

Statistic	Value
χ^2 Calculated	12.918
df	4
χ^2 Critical ($\alpha=0.05$)	9.488
p-value	0.012
Decision	Reject H_0 ✓

$\chi^2=12.918 > 9.488$; $p=0.012 < 0.05$. H_{03} is rejected. Trial intent is a significant predictor of purchase 91% of 'Strongly Agree' respondents made viral-driven purchases, far exceeding the 76% overall sample rate.

Summary of Results

Hypothesis	χ^2	p-value	Result
H ₁ — Awareness → Purchase	4.240	0.24	Not Significant
H ₂ — Perception → Purchase	12.162	0.007	Significant ✓
H ₃ — Trial Intent → Purchase	12.918	0.012	Significant ✓

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that viral marketing's commercial effectiveness is conditional and mechanism-dependent. Generating awareness is a necessary but insufficient condition for driving purchase behaviour. What converts awareness into action is the quality of consumer perception campaigns experienced as authentic, creative, and emotionally relevant produce significantly higher purchase rates and the cultivation of trial intent, which accelerates consumer decision timelines and meaningfully raises conversion probabilities.

These findings reframe how virality should be understood strategically. Rather than an end in itself, viral reach is a prerequisite whose value is realised only when coupled with substantive creative merit and genuine brand voice. Products such as Labubu dolls succeeded precisely because their virality was anchored in authentic community participation; fidget spinners and early-phase PRIME Hydration illustrate what happens when buzz outpaces credibility. For practitioners, the prescription is clear: invest in perception quality and trial acceleration, not just reach. Integrate viral campaigns within sustained brand communication ecosystems. Measure sentiment and conversion, not views alone. Viral marketing can ignite consumer curiosity; authentic brand value is what transforms that curiosity into lasting loyalty.

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