



The Impact of Viral Marketing Strategies on Consumer Purchase Intention in Social E-commerce: Based on the Mediating Role of User Engagement

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Abstract

This study, conducted within the context of social e-commerce, investigates the mechanisms by which viral marketing strategies impact consumer purchase intention, incorporating user engagement as a mediating variable for empirical analysis. The findings of this research indicate that viral marketing strategies effectively enhance consumer purchase intention. User engagement plays a pivotal role in the effectiveness of these strategies. Through their social attributes and incentive mechanisms, viral marketing strategies can stimulate users' interactive behaviors and increase their enthusiasm for participation, thereby strengthening user retention. Further analysis reveals that user engagement exerts a positive influence on consumer purchase intention. Additionally, the study identifies the mediating role of user engagement in the relationship between viral marketing strategies and consumer purchase intention. Specifically, viral marketing strategies not only directly impact consumer purchase intention but also indirectly influence it by fostering user engagement. This research contributes to the existing literature on viral marketing strategies and user engagement by offering optimization recommendations based on the findings. Additionally, it provides valuable insights for the practical implementation of social e-commerce platforms.

Keywords: Social e-Commerce, Viral Marketing Strategy, User Engagement, Consumer Purchase Intention

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of internet technology and the widespread popularity of social media applications, the e-commerce model has undergone profound changes from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. Social e-commerce, as an emerging business model, has arisen by combining social networking platforms with e-commerce activities, utilizing users' social relationships and interactions to drive product sales and brand promotion. This model not only redefines the operational logic of traditional e-commerce but also creates more interactive consumption scenarios and marketing channels for both supply and demand sides.

In the social e-commerce environment, viral marketing strategies have gradually become an important marketing tool. Viral marketing encourages existing users to spread information, attracting more new users to participate, thereby achieving rapid growth in the user base. The dissemination speed of viral marketing is fast and its reach is wide, effectively increasing brand exposure and market visibility of products. In addition, viral marketing strategies often combine reward mechanisms, such as invitation rewards, which can effectively stimulate user participation and increase user engagement (Pang, 2019).

This study primarily explores the impact of viral marketing strategies on consumer purchase intentions in the social e-commerce environment and analyzes the mediating role of user engagement in this process. By providing empirical research data and theoretical support, it offers recommendations for optimizing viral marketing strategies for social e-commerce platforms and businesses.

2. Objectives

This study primarily explores the impact of viral marketing strategies on consumer purchase intentions in the social e-commerce environment and provides an in-depth analysis of the mediating role of user engagement in this process. The specific research objectives are as follows:

- 1) To explore the direct impact of viral marketing strategies on consumer purchase intentions.

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- 2) To study the mediating role of user engagement between viral marketing strategies and consumer purchase intentions.
- 3) To provide recommendations for optimizing viral marketing strategies for social e-commerce platforms and businesses.
- 4) To provide support for theoretical research and practical applications in the field of social e-commerce.

3. Materials and Methods

This study uses literature induction, questionnaire surveys, and empirical analysis methods for research. The literature review section includes the definition of research variables, the current state of research, a review of relevant studies, and theoretical support. The questionnaire survey provides specific data to support user behavior, followed by empirical research.

3.1 Literature Review

3.1.1 Social E-Commerce

1) Definition and Concept of Social E-Commerce

Social e-commerce is the integration of social media and e-commerce, representing a new shopping model. Scholars such as Bronner and de Hoog (2011) believe that social e-commerce utilizes social media and Web 2.0 technologies, allowing consumers to join communities and share product information, thereby changing the way consumers acquire information and influencing their purchasing behavior.

2) Current Research on Social E-Commerce

Shin (2013) proposed a multi-stage model of consumer behavior, emphasizing the influence of personalized recommendations and user reviews. Chen and Shen (2015) found that social interaction significantly enhances purchase intentions and brand loyalty.

3.1.2 Viral Marketing Strategy

1) Definition of Viral Marketing Strategy

Viral marketing is a marketing strategy based on user sharing and recommendations, which achieves rapid information diffusion through user referrals. Its core lies in leveraging users' social networks and stimulating them to actively share products or services through incentive mechanisms, thus driving viral growth (Xian, 2019).

2) Current Research on Viral Marketing Strategy

Shi, Qiu and Bai, (2018) analyzed the advantages and issues of Alipay's "Red Envelope Earnings" activity. Their research shows that the core of viral marketing lies in product quality and reputation, but its long-term benefits and control over dissemination speed still need optimization.

3) Review of Research on Viral Marketing Strategy

Viral marketing is a strategy that achieves rapid information dissemination through user sharing and recommendations. It utilizes the network effect of social networks to reduce consumer cognitive risks and enhance purchase intentions. Future research should focus on optimizing incentive mechanisms, improving user retention, and exploring the synergistic effects of viral marketing with other marketing strategies.

3.1.3 User Engagement

1) Definition of User Engagement

User engagement refers to the level of activity and investment a user has during interactions with a brand, product, or service. In social e-commerce, it is an important indicator for measuring user loyalty, interactivity, and satisfaction with a brand or platform. User engagement not only reflects active user behavior but also embodies the emotional connection and loyalty users have toward the brand (Chen, 2018).

2) Current Research on User Engagement



Wang (2013) proposed the “Satisfaction- Trust- Engagement” model, suggesting that user satisfaction and trust are key factors influencing engagement. Users who actively engage are more likely to form brand recognition and loyalty.

3) Review of Research on User Engagement

User engagement encompasses multiple dimensions, including behavioral, cognitive, social, and emotional aspects. Future research should focus on how to enhance user engagement through optimizing interactive experiences, incentive mechanisms, and content design, and explore its specific role and mechanisms in viral marketing.

3.1.4 Consumer Purchase Intention

1) Definition of Consumer Purchase Intention

Consumer purchase intention refers to the psychological tendency of consumers to purchase a particular product or service in a specific situation (Liu & Liu, 2005). Purchase intention is influenced by both internal factors and external environments (Zhang, 2015).

2) Current Research on Consumer Purchase Intention

Zhong (2013) proposed that, with perceived value at its core, in the context of online shopping, perceived product quality, website service quality, purchase cost, and perceived risk are key factors affecting purchase intention. Research shows that perceived value has a significant positive impact on purchase intention.

3) Review of Research on Consumer Purchase Intention

Existing research on consumer purchase intention mainly focuses on the impact of perceived value and online word-of-mouth on purchase intention. Future research should focus on how to further enhance consumer purchase intention through optimizing marketing strategies.

3.1.5 Relationship between Viral Marketing Strategy, User Engagement, and Consumer Purchase Intention

1) Viral Marketing Strategy and Consumer Purchase Intention

Viral marketing enhances brand exposure and credibility, thereby improving brand recognition and trust (Zhang & Gu, 2015). It increases user involvement, boosts brand loyalty through interactive activities, and stimulates purchase desire (Gu, Oh, & Wang, 2016). By leveraging users' social influence, viral marketing effectively enhances the purchase intentions of potential consumers.

2) Viral Marketing Strategy and User Engagement

By designing reward mechanisms to drive users to actively share and recommend, viral marketing encourages user participation. Users increase their interaction frequency with the brand through actions such as sharing, liking, and commenting (Zhou, 2023).

3) User Engagement and Consumer Purchase Intention

Users who actively engage through frequent interactions strengthen their recognition and trust in the brand, thereby increasing their purchase intention. Active users are more likely to form emotional connections with the brand, enhancing their purchase desire (Wang & Huang, 2019).

4) The Relationship between Viral Marketing Strategy, User Engagement, and Consumer Purchase Intention

Viral marketing, through incentive mechanisms and social interaction, enhances user engagement, thereby strengthening brand recognition and trust (Santos, Coelho, & Rita, 2022). Highly engaged users, through frequent interactions and emotional investment, strengthen their loyalty to the brand, thus increasing purchase intention (Li & Phillips, 2019). In summary, viral marketing indirectly enhances consumer purchase intention by increasing user engagement.

3.1.6 Theoretical Foundation

1) Diffusion of Innovation Theory

The Diffusion of Innovation Theory explains how innovations spread and are adopted through a social system. In social e-commerce, viral marketing strategies can be seen as an innovation diffusion



mechanism, rapidly spreading information through users' social networks and encouraging innovation to be widely accepted. Viral marketing leverages the spreading effect of social networks to expand the user base.

2) Marketing Theory

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Theory emphasizes improving business performance by establishing and maintaining long-term customer relationships. Viral marketing enhances user loyalty through incentive mechanisms, encouraging users to actively share and recommend, thus strengthening customer relationships and increasing purchase intention.

Social Marketing Theory aims to achieve social change by influencing the behavior of the target group. Viral marketing uses social influence to change consumer behavior through user recommendations and sharing, creating a sense of social identity.

Consumer Behavior Theory studies the psychological processes and behavior patterns of consumers in purchasing decisions. Viral marketing influences consumer cognition, emotions, and purchase decisions through social interaction and incentive mechanisms.

3) Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory, proposed by Albert Bandura, suggests that in social e-commerce, users observe others' sharing and recommendation behaviors, imitating and participating in viral activities. Viral marketing enhances users' sense of self-efficacy through task setting and reward mechanisms, improving engagement. It influences consumers' purchase decisions through social interaction. Recommendations and reviews in social networks contribute to social identity, thereby increasing users' purchase intention.

4) SOR Model Theory

The SOR model is used to explain how external stimuli influence behavioral responses through an individual's internal state. In social e-commerce, viral marketing strategies act as an external "stimulus," triggering user participation behavior. User engagement, as the "organism's" internal state, reflects users' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in viral marketing activities. Consumer purchase intention, as the final "response," is directly influenced by user engagement.

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Construction of the Research Model

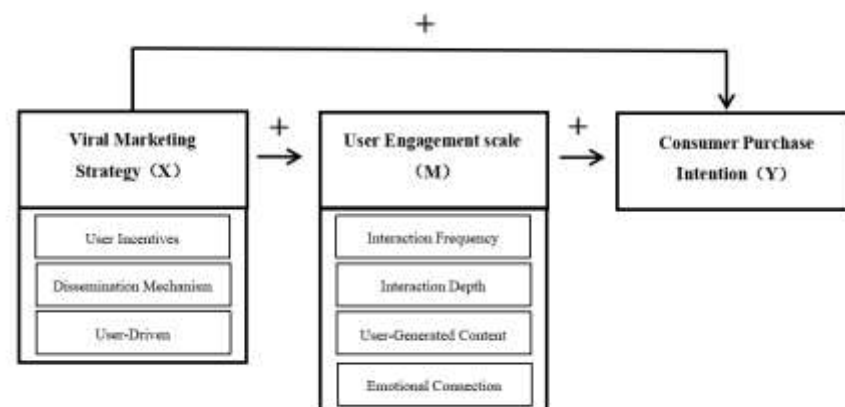


Figure 1 Theoretical Research Model

Figure 1 presents a theoretical model that describes the process through which the independent variable, Viral Marketing Strategy, influences the dependent variable, Consumer Purchase Intention, via the mediating variable, User Engagement.

3.2.2 Research Object and Hypotheses

1) Research Object

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The primary research object is users of social e-commerce platforms, i.e., consumers who shop, interact, and participate in viral marketing activities on social e-commerce platforms.

2) Research Hypotheses

Based on the above model structure, the following four research hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Viral Marketing Strategy (X) has a positive impact on Consumer Purchase Intention (Y).

H2: Viral Marketing Strategy (X) has a positive impact on User Engagement (M).

H3: User Engagement (M) has a positive impact on Consumer Purchase Intention (Y).

H4: User Engagement (M) mediates the relationship between Viral Marketing Strategy (X) and Consumer Purchase Intention (Y).

3.2.3 Scale Design

This study developed scales for three core variables by referring to existing academic literature and relevant theoretical foundations: the Viral Marketing Strategy scale, the User Engagement scale, and the Consumer Purchase Intention scale. A total of 25 items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ensuring the validity and operability of the data. The specific content of the scales is shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Variable Dimensions and Item Scales

Variable	Dimension	Code	Measurement Items
Viral Marketing Strategy	User Incentives	A1	Rewards increase my enthusiasm to participate in sharing activities.
		A2	The rewards are attractive enough to me.
		A3	The reward measures increase my willingness to purchase.
	Dissemination Mechanism	A4	The platform activities are easy to operate.
		A5	The platform rules are simple and easy to understand.
		A6	The platform obtains information in a timely and effective manner.
	User-Driven	A7	It meets my social needs.
		A8	I am willing to actively share on social platforms.
		A9	It provides me with mental satisfaction.
User Engagement scale	Interaction Frequency	B1	I often spend time browsing various information.
		B2	I frequently interact with friends or leave comments for discussion.
		B3	I am willing to regularly share my experiences.
	Interaction Depth	B4	I am willing to learn more about the activity rules.
		B5	I am willing to invest time and effort to interact.
		B6	My interactions often include personal insights and suggestions.
	User-Generated Content	B7	I will share my experiences.
		B8	I will leave product reviews.
		B9	I will actively comment and participate in discussions on the platform.
	Emotional Connection	B10	Participating in marketing activities gives me a sense of belonging.
		B11	Sharing information strengthens my emotional connection with others.
		B12	Sharing information increases my trust in the company and its products.
Consumer Purchase Intention	Purchase Intention	C1	I am willing to purchase products on social e-commerce platforms.
		C2	I plan to continue participating in marketing activities for shopping.
		C3	I will recommend others to buy products on social e-commerce platforms.
		C4	Even if given another choice, I would still be willing to shop on the platform.

3.2.4 Questionnaire

1) Questionnaire Design



This survey questionnaire covers three core variables: Viral Marketing Strategy, User Engagement, and Consumer Purchase Intention, with a total of 31 items. Based on existing, validated scales, minor optimizations were made. The questionnaire includes: an introduction, basic information, survey items, and a closing section thanking the participants for their involvement.

2) Distribution and Collection of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was distributed through the “Wenjuanxing” platform, targeting active social e-commerce users and consumers participating in viral marketing activities. The survey link was shared through user communities on social e-commerce platforms. A total of 410 questionnaires were collected, and after removing invalid responses, 405 valid questionnaires were retained.

4. Results and Discussion

SPSS statistical software was used to organize and analyze the collected data, with the following analyses conducted to examine the relationships between the variables.

4.1 Descriptive Statistical Analysis

In this survey, 59.01% of respondents were female, indicating that women are more likely to shop on social e-commerce platforms.

The age distribution shows that the highest percentage of users (34.57%) is in the 26-35 age group, followed by 18-25 years (32.10%), suggesting that social e-commerce platforms are more popular among younger users.

Regarding education level, 32.59% of users hold a bachelor's degree, and 28.64% have a college diploma, indicating that users generally have a higher level of education and strong learning abilities. Around 30% of users have a high school diploma or below, suggesting that viral marketing activities are gradually expanding into lower-tier markets.

In terms of occupation, employees in enterprises account for the highest percentage (46.17%), indicating that users are mostly from income-earning groups.

Regarding usage frequency, 47.65% of users use the platform 1-3 times a month, and 40.99% use it more than 4 times a month, indicating a relatively high usage frequency among users.

To summarize, the primary users of social e-commerce platforms are young, educated women with stable income. At the same time, these platforms are increasingly appealing to users in lower-tier markets, and the overall frequency of usage remains high.

4.2 Reliability and Validity Analysis

The Cronbach's alpha values for the variables in this study are all above 0.8, indicating good internal consistency of the scales. The overall Cronbach's alpha of the scale is 0.903, indicating very high reliability of the scale. The data results passed the reliability test, making it suitable for further analysis and research.

This study employs exploratory factor analysis. The data shows that the KMO value is 0.858, indicating a high sampling adequacy. In Bartlett's test of sphericity, the p-value is 0.000, suggesting that there are significant correlations among the variables, confirming the data's suitability for factor analysis. The test results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 KMO and Bartlett's Test

KMO value		0.858
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approximate Chi-Square	5070.546
	df	300
	p-value	0.00



Through principal component analysis, common factors were extracted from the original indicators. A total of eight factors were extracted, the cumulative variance explained was 74.809%, indicating good explanatory power of the research items on the scale. Considering that the absolute values of the factor loadings are greater than 0.5, it shows that the scale used in this study has good validity.

4.3 Correlation Analysis

The correlations between the variables show statistical significance ($p < 0.01$). The correlation coefficient between Viral Marketing Strategy and User Engagement is 0.607, indicating a strong positive correlation. The correlation coefficient between Viral Marketing Strategy and Consumer Purchase Intention is 0.557, indicating a moderate positive correlation. The correlation coefficient between User Engagement and Consumer Purchase Intention is 0.646, indicating a strong positive correlation. The results are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Correlation Analysis Results

Item	User Incentives	Dissemination Mechanism	User-Driven	Interaction Frequency	Interaction Depth	User-Generated Content	Emotional Connection	Viral Marketing Strategy	User Engagement scale	Consumer Purchase Intention
User Incentives	1									
Dissemination Mechanism	0.223**	1								
User-Driven	0.277**	0.315**	1							
Interaction Frequency	0.364**	0.249**	0.305*	1						
Interaction Depth	0.292**	0.243**	0.309*	0.280**	1					
User-Generated Content	0.312**	0.340**	0.226*	0.262**	0.211**	1				
Emotional Connection	0.283**	0.281**	0.291*	0.327**	0.253**	0.254**	1			
Viral Marketing Strategy	0.702**	0.711**	0.739*	0.427**	0.393**	0.408**	0.397**	1		
User Engagement scale	0.467**	0.415**	0.422*	0.695**	0.657**	0.645**	0.682**	0.607**	1	
Consumer Purchase Intention	0.424**	0.364**	0.410*	0.469**	0.469**	0.392**	0.399**	0.557**	0.646**	1

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

4.4 Regression Analysis

First, a linear regression analysis was conducted with Viral Marketing Strategy and User Engagement as independent variables, and Consumer Purchase Intention as the dependent variable. The model's R^2 is 0.461, indicating that the two variables explain 46.1% of the variance in consumer purchase intention. The F-test ($F = 171.726$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$) suggests that at least one of the two variables has a

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significant impact on consumer purchase intention. The regression coefficient for Viral Marketing Strategy is 0.158 ($t = 5.683$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$), and the regression coefficient for User Engagement is 0.244 ($t = 10.574$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$), indicating that both variables have a significant positive impact on consumer purchase intention. The VIF values are all 1.582, indicating no multicollinearity issues. The results are shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Linear Regression Analysis Results

Linear regression analysis results (n=405)							
Item	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	p	Collinearity diagnosis	
	B	Standard error	Beta			VIF	Tolerance
Constant	-0.510	0.676	-	-0.754	0.451	-	-
Viral Marketing Strategy	0.158	0.028	0.262	5.683	0.000**	1.582	0.632
User Engagement scale	0.244	0.023	0.487	10.574	0.000**	1.582	0.632
R ²	0.461						
Adjust R ²	0.458						
F	F (2,402) = 171.726, p=0.000						

Note: Dependent variable = Consumer Purchase Intention

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Then, a linear regression analysis was conducted with Viral Marketing Strategy as the independent variable and User Engagement as the dependent variable. The model's R^2 is 0.368, indicating that Viral Marketing Strategy can explain 36.8% of the variation in User Engagement. The F-test ($F = 234.736$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$) and the regression coefficient for Viral Marketing Strategy of 0.730 ($t = 15.321$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$) indicate that Viral Marketing Strategy has a significant positive impact on User Engagement.

4.5 Mediation Effect Test Analysis

The mediation effect analysis involves three models, as follows:

Viral Marketing Strategy → Consumer Purchase Intention: The regression coefficient is 0.336 ($p < 0.01$), indicating that Viral Marketing Strategy has a significant positive impact on Consumer Purchase Intention.

Viral Marketing Strategy → User Engagement: The regression coefficient is 0.730 ($p < 0.01$), indicating that Viral Marketing Strategy has a significant positive impact on User Engagement.

Viral Marketing Strategy + User Engagement → Consumer Purchase Intention: The regression coefficient for User Engagement is 0.244 ($p < 0.01$), indicating that User Engagement has a significant positive impact on Consumer Purchase Intention.

The overall R^2 of the model is 0.461, indicating that the model can explain approximately 46.1% of the variation in the dependent variable. The results are shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5 Mediation Effect Model Test

Item	Consumer Purchase Intention	User Engagement scale	Consumer Purchase Intention
Constant	3.205**	15.246**	-0.510
Viral Marketing Strategy	0.336**	0.730**	0.158**

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User Engagement scale			0.244**
R ²	0.311	0.368	0.461
Adjust R ²	0.309	0.367	0.458
F □	F (1,403) =181.684, p=0.000 F (1,403) =234.736, p=0.000 F (2,402) =171.726, p=0.000		

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

The total effect is 0.336 and significant ($p < 0.01$), indicating that Viral Marketing Strategy has a significant positive impact on Consumer Purchase Intention. The mediation effect is 0.178, with a Boot SE of 0.033, a p-value of 0.000, and a 95% Bootstrap confidence interval of [0.231, 0.362], suggesting that User Engagement plays a significant mediating role between Viral Marketing Strategy and Consumer Purchase Intention.

The mediation effect is significant ($a*b = 0.178$), and the direct effect ($c' = 0.158$) is also significant. This indicates that User Engagement partially mediates the relationship between Viral Marketing Strategy and Consumer Purchase Intention.

4.6 Hypothesis Test Results

H1: Viral Marketing Strategy has a positive impact on Consumer Purchase Intention – Supported

H2: Viral Marketing Strategy has a positive impact on User Engagement – Supported

H3: User Engagement has a positive impact on Consumer Purchase Intention – Supported

H4: User Engagement mediates the relationship between Viral Marketing Strategy and Consumer Purchase Intention – Partial mediation supported

5. Conclusion

5.1 Conclusion and Contributions

Viral marketing strategy has a direct positive impact on consumer purchase intention.

User engagement plays a key role in viral marketing. Viral marketing stimulates user interaction through its social attributes and incentive mechanisms, enhancing brand affiliation and loyalty, which in turn increases user engagement. High-engagement users have a higher level of brand recognition and trust, leading to stronger purchase intention.

User engagement has a partial mediating effect. Viral marketing not only directly influences purchase intention but also indirectly impacts purchase intention by enhancing user engagement. By increasing users' sense of participation and social interaction, viral marketing further stimulates purchasing behavior.

The study verifies the effectiveness of viral marketing strategies in social e-commerce, revealing the mediating role of user engagement and enriching theoretical research in related fields. By introducing user engagement as a mediating variable into the relationship between viral marketing and consumer purchase intention, this study expands the research on user engagement and provides new theoretical support for understanding user behavior. Combining the characteristics of social e-commerce, this research deepens the understanding of the mechanism behind viral marketing strategies and provides a theoretical basis for platform optimization.

5.2 Recommendations

This study has several limitations. First, there may be sample-related limitations. The sample primarily consists of young users from first-tier cities, which may not be sufficient to represent a broader and more diverse user population. Second, the study did not take other potential mediating variables into account. Future research could explore the combined effects of multiple mediators to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying viral marketing strategies. Finally, moderating variables were



not examined. Future studies could introduce contextual factors—such as promotional intensity—to analyze how these factors moderate the effectiveness of viral marketing strategies.

Recommendations for future research are outlined as follows. Businesses should design more attractive viral marketing campaigns by incentivizing users to share products through rewards, regular promotions, and other strategies. At the same time, they should focus on user experience and avoid over-marketing that could lead to user dissatisfaction. Users' sense of brand affiliation can be enhanced by incorporating innovative interactive features. Introducing gamification mechanisms can also increase user interest and stickiness. Furthermore, businesses should develop differentiated strategies based on user characteristics in order to improve the targeting of campaigns. Personalized recommendations can be optimized by combining user interests with social motivations, thereby improving promotional effectiveness and the overall shopping experience. The use of data analysis tools is recommended to monitor user behavior and engagement, identify efficient viral paths, and optimize campaign design. Finally, a combination of online viral marketing and offline promotional activities could help expand exposure and extend market reach. In conclusion, the implementation of these measures will contribute to increased platform growth and competitiveness, ultimately accelerating brand promotion and the expansion of its market share.

By integrating perspectives from viral marketing strategies and user engagement, this study bridges theories from both marketing and behavioral sciences. The proposed theoretical framework offers a more holistic understanding of viral marketing effectiveness and highlights the mediating role of user engagement in the relationship between viral marketing and purchase intention. This contributes a novel perspective and direction to the existing body of research.

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