Research on the Reasons for Viral Marketing Being a Commonly Adopted Marketing Method in Chinese Milk Tea Shops

Zibu Fang

School of Business, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, the United Kingdom
1176467389@qq.com

Abstract: In the development of marketing strategies based on consumer tastes and dynamism in China's milk tea industry, viral marketing approaches are emerging in this process, as brands start to diversify their business models to offer more diverse consumer experiences. Although viral marketing enables brands to position themselves as trendy, innovative, and community-oriented, their scaling up is influenced by consumer perceptions and attitude-behaviour gaps. Thus, this study investigates why the Chinese milk tea industry is fond of applying viral marketing, exploring how Chinese milk tea stores can utilise viral marketing to refine their brand image and consumer perceptions. Employing a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 6 participants who are frequent or returning consumers of those Chinese milk tea brands. The result revealed that viral marketing characters had a significant impact on consumer perceptions and brand images by enhancing emotional engagement and creating symbolic values. This study extends the existing literature on viral marketing and the narrative paradigm by providing empirical evidence supporting the importance of emotional connection and symbolic values in social media hype. The current study's limitations and future research directions are discussed, underscoring the need for ongoing exploration and refinement of our understanding of narratives and narrative-extended theoretical frameworks in a constantly evolving market landscape.

Keywords: viral marketing, narrative paradigm, Chinese milk tea industry, cultural marketing

1.   Introduction

In an increasingly saturated marketplace, brands should differentiate themselves not only through products and services but also through compelling storytelling. Narratives in modern branding strategies have emerged as powerful tools to forge emotional connections, enhance brand identity, and influence consumer behaviour [1]. Unlike traditional marketing approaches that focus on features and benefits, narrative-driven branding constructs a cohesive and relatable story that resonates with audiences on a deeper level [2].

The Chinese milk tea industry has experienced explosive growth in recent years, driven not only by evolving consumer tastes but also by highly dynamic marketing strategies. Viral marketing approaches are emerging in this process, as brands start to diversify their business models to offer more diverse consumer experiences. Although viral marketing enables brands to position themselves as trendy, innovative, and community-oriented, their scaling up is influenced by consumer

perceptions and attitude-behaviour gaps. Research on consumer values related to viral marketing characters is scarce, hindering marketers from persuading consumers to engage.

Hence, this paper discusses the marketing campaigns of famous Chinese milk tea stores, focusing on how they can utilise narrative-driven branding, such as viral marketing, to influence consumer perceptions and enhance their brand image and reputation. This research employs a qualitative approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with six frequent milk tea customers from different regions of China. In addition, this study aims to provide insights into how narratives can enhance consumer loyalty and improve brand identity by analysing the data using the Framework Method under a grounded theory perspective.

This study offers practical implications and recommendations for those who want to establish a milk tea start-up in China. By comprehending the impact of viral marketing on reshaping brand image and consumer perceptions, entrepreneurs can make informed decisions regarding long-term, sustainable brand development to optimise their profitability. By understanding the impact of viral marketing on various consumer experience dimensions, companies can make informed decisions regarding how to utilise viral marketing to sustain long-term brand development.

2. Literature review

2.1. The narrative paradigm

The narrative paradigm introduced by Walter Fisher posits that humans are natural storytellers who understand and interpret the world through narratives, and that any human interaction can be classified as storytelling [3]. This framework emphasises that effective communication hinges on the coherence and fidelity of stories, making narratives a potent tool in shaping beliefs and behaviours. Fisher's narrative paradigm challenges the traditional rational world paradigm by asserting that narratives are more persuasive to humans than logical arguments [3]. The narrative paradigm will follow two main principles: coherence and fidelity. Coherence means that any content within the communication is effective only if it makes sense to the audience. Hence, the extent of a narrative's sense-making is determined by this principle. Meanwhile, the validity of a narrative story is also determined by the tale's framework, the internal resemblance, and the reliability of the characters [4]. Secondly, fidelity is another principle that indicates the credibility and dependability of the story. The persuasion of the listener primarily determines whether the person adopts the story or not, while a set of values is followed to assess the story's reliability [5]. Moreover, this principle is further characterised as a "betweenness," construed as both intersubjective (obligations between the narrator and the listener) and as a resonance between the story and the social, along with the story's connotative cultural context [5]. These principles suggest that audiences are more likely to accept messages that are coherent and align with their values and experiences. In the context of marketing, particularly viral marketing, leveraging the narrative paradigm can significantly amplify the reach and impact of marketing messages.

2.2. Viral marketing

Viral marketing refers to strategies that encourage individuals to share marketing messages with others, resulting in rapid and widespread dissemination, much like the spread of a virus. This approach leverages social networks and relies heavily on human interactions and communications [6]. The effectiveness of viral marketing campaigns depends on several factors, including content appeal, social sharing mechanisms, and network effects. Content appeal refers to the ability of companies to create engaging, entertaining, or informative content that resonates with their target audience. Akpinar and Berger pointed out that viral communication is not enough for marketing success, so content needs to be widely spread while providing value to the brand [7]. Some viral content may

increase engagement, but it fails to improve brand perception or drive conversions. Marketing content that incorporates brand-related information tends to have a more substantial positive impact compared to content that is merely entertaining or shareable. Additionally, consumers are more likely to recall and engage with brands when the content aligns with the brand's identity.

Secondly, social sharing mechanisms indicate the utilisation of easy-to-use platforms and tools that facilitate sharing and spreading influence. Miller and Lamma contended that social media has become a critical enabler of viral marketing, which could allow brands to access and engage audiences more effectively than traditional marketing methods [8]. Their research underscored the importance of word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing on social media, where credibility plays a key role in successful viral campaigns, as users are more likely to engage with and share content recommended by friends or influencers rather than direct brand messaging. Thirdly, network effects for digital platforms mean that more users could attract more users, and more buyers could attract more sellers [9]. Influence diffusion plays a central role in viral marketing, determining how quickly and widely content spreads within a network [10]. Social media, most of which are two-sided platforms, could attract both users and sellers to expand brand reputation and recognition in viral marketing.

2.3. Viral marketing in narrative paradigm

Viral marketing can be viewed as an extended framework within the narrative paradigm, by emphasising how engaging narratives facilitate the rapid dissemination of content across digital platforms. In emotional resonance, viral marketing campaigns often craft narratives that evoke strong emotions, such as joy, surprise, or empathy, to encourage their recipients to share. Content with emotional, romantic, humorous, or socially relevant messages tends to be more engaging and shareable [11]. In the context of relatability and authenticity, users are more likely to share stories within their networks if they align with the audience's values and experiences. Lundqvist et al. found that when audiences perceive alignment between the brand's narratives and their unique values, they are more likely to view the brand as authentic, thereby strengthening their connection to it [2]. The last key element is cultural and social context, indicating that compelling viral narratives often tap into current cultural trends or societal issues to make the content more timely and relevant. According to cultural branding theory, creating symbolic value that resonates deeply with consumers' identities and collective aspirations can help sustain the long-term development of this brand and gradually transform it into an icon [12]. Icons can only be constructed by a strategy that focuses on what the brand stands for, rather than its performance compared to traditional marketing.

The narrative paradigm offers a valuable framework for understanding and enhancing viral marketing efforts. By crafting narratives that resonate deeply with the audience, marketers can tap into the innate human affinity for storytelling, increasing message acceptance and sharing. Ongoing research at the intersection of narrative theory and viral marketing will continue to uncover strategies that effectively engage audiences in an ever-evolving digital landscape.

3. Methodology

3.1. Semi-structured interviews

To better understand the impact of viral marketing on the Chinese milk tea industry, this study employs semi-structured in-depth interviews to capture the more personal and emotional resonance of viral marketing narratives. The interview questions were designed using a Straussian grounded theory approach, and based on the question in narrative-driven brands research. The framework method is a content analysis technique developed by Ritchie and Spencer that can facilitate theory development through its systematic coding process [13-14]. This method is suitable for this research as it enables effective comparison and distinction of data within and between individual cases. The

analytical stages of the Framework Method are illustrated in Figure 1. Although, the limitation of the framework method is that it is incompatibility with highly diverse data and necessitates the presence of similar themes to facilitate categorisation [15], this study developed a framework based on themes identified in previous literature, which mitigate this limitation slightly.
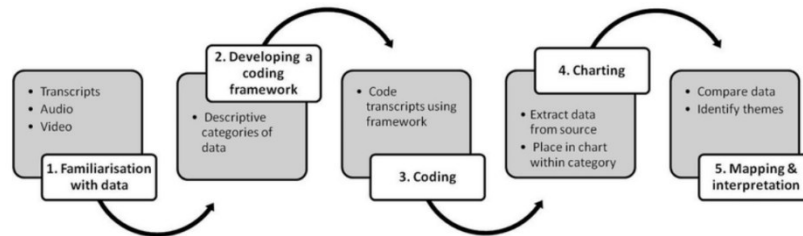
Figure 1: Five-step process in framework analysis [13]

A total of six participants were involved in the semi-structured interviews, which were completed between January and February 2025 respectively. All interviews were conducted in person and face-to-face, recorded on video, and securely stored before transcription. Participants were allowed to provide additional relevant information based on their own understanding at the end of each interview. For ethical reasons, participants' names were replaced with alphabetic characters.

3.2. Results

The findings are integrated with relevant explanations and theoretical frameworks, to illustrate how the data enhances and supplements existing literature and theoretical perspectives. According to Figure 2, the research is divided into two parts, the first is elevating brand perception through social media hype, which focuses on how viral marketing builds emotional connections with consumers, thereby influencing brand perceptions and consumer engagement. The second is strengthening brand identity through aesthetic and emotional appeal, which focuses on how viral marketing creates symbolic values that consumers can follow, thereby enhancing brand identity.
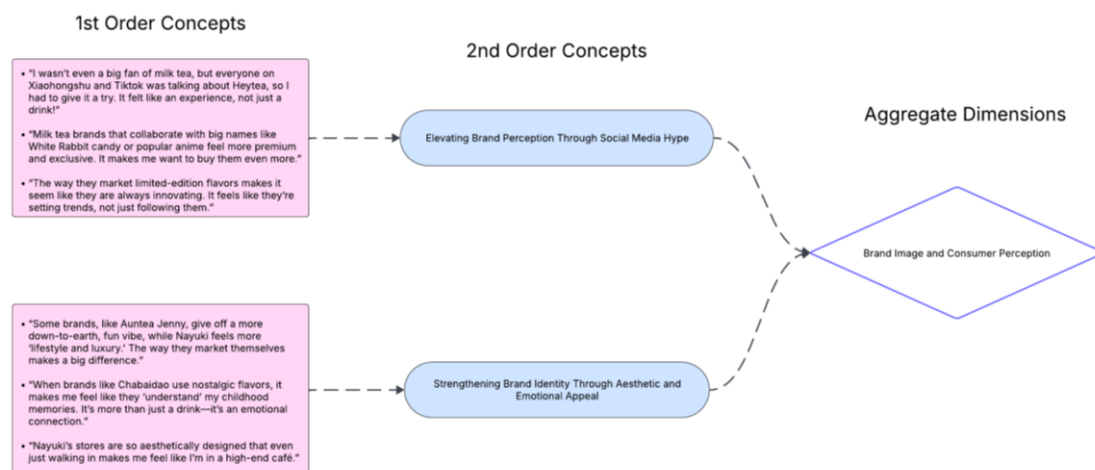
Figure 2: Coding structure

3.3. Elevating brand perception through social media hype

Upon analysing and categorising the interview results, this research first concluded that the findings revealed the impact of elevating brand perception through social media hype. Viral marketing often leverages social networks and relies heavily on human interactions and communications to build

implicit emotional connections between brands and consumers [6]. Participant A, a low-intensity customer of milk tea brands, explained her experience:

A: I wasn't even a big fan of milk tea, but everyone on Xiaohongshu and Douyin was talking about Heytea, so I had to give it a try. It felt like an experience, not just a drink!"

A's experience illustrates how viral marketing could work on social media to build emotional connections. This finding is consistent with Koçyiğit's research, which indicates that content with emotional, romantic, humorous, or socially relevant messages tends to be more engaging and shareable [11]. Participant B, a frequent consumer of milk tea brands, complemented this idea:

B: "Milk tea brands that collaborate with big names like White Rabbit candy or popular anime feel more premium and exclusive. It makes me want to buy them even more."

B's perspective illustrates how brands can utilise narratives to connect with consumers. Research by Lundqvist et al. could support this, stressing that when audiences perceive alignment between the brand's narratives and their unique values, they will view the brand as more authentic, thereby enhancing their connection to it [2]. Moreover, participant C, also a frequent consumer of milk tea brands, shared her perspective on how brands could use narratives to differentiate themselves and refine their brand images:

C: "The way they market limited-edition flavours makes it seem like they are always innovating. It feels like they're setting trends, not just following them."

C's opinion could be supported by Akpinar and Berger, underscoring that content should not only spread widely but also provide value to the brand, and consumers are more likely to recall and engage with brands when the content aligns with the brand's identity [7].

Throughout the interviews, participants consistently emphasised the critical role of viral marketing narratives in elevating brand perception through social media hype. This research can further develop the existing literature, indicating that brands disseminate this type of narrative through social media to establish implicit emotional associations with consumers, thereby differentiating their brands and refining consumer perceptions.

3.4. Strengthening brand identity through aesthetic and emotional appeal

In addition to elevating the brand perception, strengthening brand identity through aesthetic and emotional appeal by creating symbolic values is another aspect of narratives in viral marketing. Holt underscored that compelling viral narratives often tap into current cultural trends or societal issues to make the content more timely and relevant [12]. Participant D shared his perspective:

D: "Some brands, like Auntea Jenny, give off a more down-to-earth, fun vibe, while Nayuki feels more 'lifestyle and luxury.' The way they market themselves makes a big difference."

D's perspective demonstrates how brands can attach unique values that cater to current cultural trends to enhance their marketing effectiveness. This finding aligns with Holt's cultural marketing theory [12]. Participants E and F also shared their experience with this:

E: "When brands like Chabaidao use nostalgic flavours, it makes me feel like they 'understand' my childhood memories. It's more than just a drink—it's an emotional connection."

F: "Nayuki's stores are so aesthetically designed that even just walking in makes me feel like I'm in a high-end café."

These findings illustrate how brands could reinforce their identity by creating aesthetic and emotional appeal in viral marketing narratives. These symbolic values, which resonate deeply with consumers' identities and collective aspirations, could help sustain the long-term development of these brands and gradually transform them into icons [12]. Moreover, this research can further demonstrate Holt's perspective, indicating that aesthetic and emotional appeal can work complementarily with consumers' identities and collective aspirations to foster a strong consumer-brand relationship, thereby reinforcing brand identity and brand reputation.

4.   Conclusion

This research investigates the reasons that milk tea industry, a burgeoning sector in China, is increasingly utilising viral marketing to shape consumer perceptions and enhance brand image. It is found that viral marketing approaches, especially social media hype and immersive stories, can foster strong emotional connections between consumers and brands, while reinforcing brand image and identity by assigning the brand with symbolic values that consumers want to pursue or adopt. The findings of this study contribute to the growing knowledge of viral marketing in the Chinese milk tea industry and have practical implications for milk tea brands seeking to differentiate themselves. Future research could delve deeper into additional factors and interventions that can further enhance the effectiveness of viral marketing narratives.

Moreover, this study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the study used semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. While this approach enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences, it is susceptible to potential biases, such as interviewer and participant bias, which may compromise the validity of the findings [16]. Second, the study's sample consisted of returning consumers of Chinese milk tea brands. Although this selected sample provided valuable insights into the generalisability of the findings, it may not account for industry-specific nuances that impact the relationship between viral marketing narratives and brand image. Future research could examine how such narrative specifically influences consumer behaviour under specific scenarios or cultural backgrounds to better assist in understanding the contextual factors that affect viral marketing outcomes.

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