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**VIRAL VIDEO MARKETING ON TIKTOK - EFFECTS ON BRANDS BEYOND VIEWS,
LIKES AND SHARES**

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>This study focuses on a very topical subject of viral marketing on the social media platform TikTok. Viral marketing has been proven efficient in today's media landscape, and the role of TikTok, the fastest-growing social media platform in the world, has been recently highlighted. TikTok's short-form video content offers a great fit to the modern fast-paced content consumption preferences, and the algorithm-based operating model, combined with the vast user base, enables the next level of reach for the content. Thus, TikTok offers an intriguing platform for viral marketing – however, relatively little about it is still known in the academic world.</p> <p>This study studies how companies can utilize firm-generated viral video marketing content on TikTok to improve brand value. In addition, this research provides a comprehensive outlook on viral marketing by studying viral marketing as a phenomenon, the characteristics of successful viral marketing content, and the multifaceted role of brands in viral marketing. This study contributes to a research gap, which requires attention from multiple directions: While viral marketing has been studied extensively, its effects on brand overall require more research. Even more significantly, TikTok has minimal research as a platform, even less regarding viral marketing there, and practically no prior research exists regarding viral marketing on TikTok and its effects on brands.</p> <p>This study was conducted as qualitative research, and semi-structured interviews were utilized to interview five companies that operate primarily in the Finnish B2C sector and have utilized viral video marketing on TikTok. The chosen study method enabled a thorough and robust exploration of the topic but gave significant value to each respondent's answers. As a result, a comprehensive analysis was produced that demonstrated clear findings when combined with prior research.</p> <p>This study discovered that TikTok is a superbly efficient platform to conduct viral marketing and that firm-generated viral marketing content on TikTok can be utilized to increase brand value. This research suggests that the increase is mainly caused by increased brand awareness and fortified brand image, which also contribute to increased brand preference and loyalty. Brands can increase these brand aspects by producing content that maximizes virality but is also recognizably linked to the brand. The content should be entertaining, humorous, and attention-grabbing for maximum virality. Organic-looking, low production, and relatively short content succeed the best in TikTok. The brand should be visible in the content, but it needs to be a subtle and integral part of the content to avoid advertisement-like feelings. In addition to viral marketing content, brands should also produce other types of content, such as informational, to maximize the effect and engage with different audiences. This study suggests that marketing managers should utilize viral marketing on TikTok to build brand awareness and fortify brand image.</p>			
Keywords Viral marketing, viral video marketing, brand equity, TikTok			
Additional information			

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

The Internet has impacted people's lives in a way comparable to Gutenberg's printing technique back in the day (Quesenberry & Coolsen, 2019). The same goes for marketers. As a result of the rise of the internet and social media, the media landscape has been changing significantly: in today's world, media keeps getting fragmented, and consumers have increasingly more options for channels to choose from (Porter & Golan, 2006).

Social networking sites (SNSs), more familiarly known as social media, have been a significant part of this rise of interactivity and have opened a way for dialogue between companies and customers (Izogo & Mpinganjira, 2020). As a result, the advertising environment has become increasingly interactive (J. Huang, Su, Zhou & Liu, 2013), and interactivity has become a central part of today's marketing practices. It generates di-directional value by allowing connections, participation, and engagement between organizations and customers. (C. L. Wang, 2021). Social media is renewing the ways of traditional marketing communication (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015) and turning the previously one-way communication multi-dimensional (Berthon, Pitt & Campbell, 2008).

While the internet and social media have provided tremendous benefits and possibilities to marketers, particular challenges have arisen recently. As the content consumption channels have increased, so has the amount of advertising. Consumers are exposed to hundreds of branded messages daily via various channels (Eckler & Bolls, 2011). TV, billboards, and radio have become filled with commercial advertisements (Milak & Dobrinić, 2017). Eventually, the overwhelming number of ads annoys customers and becomes clutter (Obermiller, Spangenberg & MacLachlan, 2005; Rotfeld, 2006). To fight against the overwhelmingness of advertisements, consumers are constantly becoming more sophisticated in avoiding advertisements and have developed a habit of avoiding promotional content (Manly, 2005). Therefore, it has become increasingly challenging for brands to find a place in consumers' memories

and achieve recognition or recall, due to the growing amounts of content and decreasing attention to brands (Zhang, Wedel & Pieters, 2009).

At the same time, today's consumers live in a content-rich and time-poor reality (Tellis, MacInnis, Tirunillai & Zhang, 2019). With the constantly increasing amount of content, individuals are becoming increasingly critical about what they consume and share (Reichstein & Brusch, 2019; Tellis et al., 2019). Recent generations, Gen Y and Gen Z, highlight this even further. Gen Z, people born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019), is characterized by having shorter attention spans compared to previous generations, which is often linked to their constant interaction with multiple digital platforms and their preference for quick, engaging content (Huss, 2023; Schmitt & Lancaster, 2019). Gen Z is characterized by a straightforward, casual, and personal approach to interacting with brands on social media (Southgate, 2017). Duffett (2022) highlights that Generation Z expects seamless flow of information, products, and brand in the online world. The particularities of these recent generations have forced brands to look for new methods for pushing engagement and interaction, for example, through social media (Ortiz, Santos Corrada, Lopez, Dones & Lugo, 2023).

In this time-poor and ad-cluttered environment, advertisers constantly seek new ways to reach their target audiences (Eckler & Bolls, 2011). In response to increasing consumer irritation to the invasive advertising forms and a drop in trust towards marketer-created messages, advertisers are shifting their focus towards viral marketing strategies (Huh, Kim, Rath, Lu & Srivastava, 2020). Viral marketing means marketing strategies that permit exponential content distribution in network-based channels as an organic process (Reichstein & Brusch, 2019). To simplify, viral marketing is a process where consumers voluntarily consume commercial content and share it with others, leading to exponential spreading (Quesenberry & Coolson, 2019).

Viral marketing provides a great fit in the current era of consumer control (Petrescu, Korgaonkar & Girona, 2015), which has turned it into one of the most influential phenomena in marketing (S.-C. Chu, 2011; Eckler & Bolls, 2011; Porter & Golan, 2006). As a result, viral marketing has become one of the most influential and imperative marketing strategies (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). Viral marketing is a significant part of increasing digital advertising spending (Quesenberry & Coolson,

2019), and brands and advertising agencies increasingly add viral video marketing to their toolboxes (Eckler & Bolls, 2011). Viral marketing can be utilized for multiple business goals, such as promoting products and services, interacting with customers, or improving brand recognition and value (Arica et al., 2022; M. T. Liu, Xue & Liu, 2021).

When successful, viral marketing is a potent marketing tool. Akpınar & Berger (2017) even describe viral marketing as the holy grail of digital marketing. Viral marketing offers multiple benefits, such as high-speed and cost-effective distribution of content (Welker, 2002), more comprehensive campaign reach, reduced advertising avoidance, and earned media recognition for the company (S. Cho, Huh & Faber, 2014; Dobele, Lindgreen, Beverland, Vanhamme & van Wijk, 2007; Eckler & Bolls, 2011).

However, while viral marketing might sound intriguing, it is not easy. Souki, Chinelato & Gonçalves Filho (2022) describe that developing a successful viral campaign is one of the highest conquests in marketing, which Watts & Peretti (2007) fulfill by describing producing successful viral content as one of the most challenging marketing goals to achieve. The success of viral marketing can be a hit or miss (Wen, Choi, Wu & Morris, 2022), and most of the viral-intended campaigns do not go viral (Petrescu et al., 2015).

To increase the possibility of virality, many brands have chosen to prioritize aspects that increase views and sharing; however, this may be sacrificing advertising effectiveness (Akpınar & Berger, 2017). As a result, viral video advertisements are often treated more as entertainment than advertisement, as people focus on the exciting content rather than the brand (J. Huang et al., 2013). High viewing or sharing rates of this kind of content do not necessarily lead to company success (Reichstein & Bruschi, 2019): even if millions of consumers share and watch the viral ad, but it does not increase sales or boost brand evaluation, then the virality does not benefit the brand (Akpınar & Berger, 2017).

1.2 Justifications and the purpose of the study

In order not to produce free entertainment without any return, the viral marketing focus mustn't be purely on the distribution but on whether content positively affects the brand (Reichstein & Bruschi, 2019). This study focuses on branding aspects and aims to find answers to how companies can utilize viral video marketing to increase their brand value. To offer a comprehensive answer, the study seeks to provide answers and guidance to both presented troubles: how to be viral and how a brand can benefit from virality.

Previous research has studied viral marketing comprehensively from multiple perspectives. However, most of the research has studied the virality aspects of the content; only more recent studies have started to emphasize the brand effects. However, more research has still been conducted on how brand affects virality than vice versa. Multiple researchers list that more research is required on how viral videos affect the advertiser brand (Berger, 2014; Souki et al., 2022; Tellis et al., 2019). Thus, there is a clear need for further research on how viral marketing affects brands.

This study focuses mainly on the brand effects of viral video marketing on the social media platform TikTok. The existing research regarding TikTok is limited, which offers a clear spot for further research. The need for research is highlighted, as TikTok is one of the fastest growing platforms (Wahid, Karjalainen, Taiminen & Asiati, 2023), with over 1,5 billion users (Statista, 2024b). However, the research is especially needed from the viral marketing perspective, as TikTok is reported to provide an ideal place for viral marketing (S. C. Chu, Deng & Mundel, 2024). Thus, the study will contribute to the constantly growing field of research. In addition to providing platform-specific answers, the research aims to provide answers that can be generalized into short-form viral video marketing, even beyond TikTok as a platform.

In addition, viral marketing is a relatively new and constantly developing topic. Even if some topics have been studied, viral marketing is a very trend-oriented topic that is exposed to quick changes and new directions. Thus, it is justified to constantly compare current and previous research to study the advancements and latest viral

marketing trends. Constant research on specific media formats will provide valuable information with practical use cases.

Overall, this study aims to contribute to fulfilling a research gap in two vital research areas: viral marketing's effects on brands and viral marketing on TikTok. Furthermore, this study aims to combine these two aspects into one more focused aspect and seek answers to how viral marketing done in TikTok affects brands and how companies could utilize it to increase their brand value. To do this, this study aims to provide comprehensive and practical managerial implications regarding viral video marketing's practical implementation. This study seeks generalized and practical guidelines regarding firm-generated viral video marketing on TikTok. In addition to answering generally how brands can utilize viral video marketing on TikTok to increase brand value, this study aims to find what kind of material provides the best results. Altogether, this work aims to provide clear guidelines for efficient and value-providing viral video marketing.

As a study setting, this study focuses on companies operating in Finland and primarily in the B2C market. This study is limited to considering only firm-generated viral video content, and it excludes, i.e., advertising via influencers and other third parties.

To contribute to the research gaps and points of interest described above, the main research question of this study has been formed as follows:

How can companies utilize firm-generated viral video marketing in TikTok to enhance brand value?

The main research question will provide comprehensive results describing what kind of brand-related effects viral video marketing can provide companies. In addition, three supporting research questions are presented to provide more detailed information about the research. Supporting research questions are focused on the more practical implications of viral marketing and are used as a tool to answer the main research question, as well as to provide more comprehensive managerial implications. This study will answer the following supporting research questions:

1. *What are the benefits of viral video marketing on TikTok?*
2. *What kind of content provides the most virality on TikTok?*
3. *How does viral marketing affect brands?*

1.3 Key concepts of the study

Viral marketing is a marketing strategy that leverages network-based channels to enable exponential distribution of marketing content, facilitating rapid and widespread dissemination with relatively minimal effort. This marketing technique utilizes the natural tendencies of individuals to share engaging content, thus amplifying the reach and impact of the message at a low cost. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011; Porter & Golan, 2006; Reichstein & Bruschi, 2019).

Viral video marketing means the use of video content as a medium within viral marketing campaigns to benefit from the dynamic and engaging power of visual media. Viral video marketing utilizes the built-in properties of video to evoke strong emotional reactions, convey messages vividly, and encourage sharing among viewers more powerfully compared to other forms of media. (Eckler & Bolls, 2011; J. Huang et al., 2013; Quesenberry & Coolson, 2019).

Brand is a distinctive identity that includes a company's values, characteristics, and attributes that distinguish it from its competitors. This identity is compiled through elements such as name, logo, design, and a consistent theme that appears in all marketing communications. Effective branding creates a memorable impression on consumers and serves as a promise to the customer regarding the quality and reliability of the product or service being offered. (D. Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

Firm-generated content (FGC) is communication from companies that is designed to be shared through their official social media pages, and it is strategically crafted by firms to enhance brand visibility, engage directly with consumers, and foster a relationship with the target audience. FGC includes all forms of content created by firms that is intended to be shared across social platforms. The primary aim of FGC is to stimulate consumer interest and interaction, influencing consumer perceptions such

as brand awareness, loyalty, and ultimately, purchase intentions. (Poulis, Rizomyliotis & Konstantoulaki, 2019).

1.4 Structure of the study

This study will use qualitative methodology. First, a literature review will be conducted, followed by semi-structured interviews with five companies that have utilized viral video marketing in TikTok in their marketing. The interview data will then be analyzed and connected to the theoretical framework. Finally, the discovered insights, similarities, and differences will be discussed.

The first chapter of the study introduces the reader to the subject. The summarized introduction provides an overview of the topic that the following research will cover. In addition, the research goals and questions are presented, followed by sub-chapters describing the research.

The second chapter presents the high-level construct of social media marketing and introduces TikTok as a platform to the reader. This chapter is vital in understanding the environment where viral marketing takes place overall and especially in recognizing the particularities related to TikTok as a platform.

The third chapter presents viral marketing as a phenomenon. This chapter elaborates on the definition of viral marketing and thoroughly introduces the reader to the subject and its background.

The fourth chapter studies the content factors of viral marketing. It provides a deep dive into content consumption and sharing preferences, which are vital in achieving virality. This chapter will also present the benefits and suitability of video as a format for viral video marketing.

The fifth chapter extends viral marketing into the core of this study, studying its brand-related aspects. The chapter covers both sides of brands and viral marketing: how brands affect virality and how virality affects brands. At the end of this chapter, all the

previous chapters are combined into a theoretical framework, which will be introduced to the reader.

After the theoretical background, the sixth chapter presents the study's methodology. This chapter provides a comprehensive and transparent overview of the research's practicalities and further describes the research methodologies used. The seventh chapter offers the empirical examination of interviews.

Finally, the eighth chapter concludes the study by presenting the analyzing key results, answering the research questions, and describing managerial implications. In addition, the chapter assesses the study's reliability and limitations and suggests future avenues for research.

2 SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

This chapter will discuss social media marketing as a whole and present TikTok as a platform. Viral marketing is a more significant phenomenon than part of it happening in social media, but still, social media is such a core part of modern viral marketing and this study, that it is beneficial to gather understanding regarding it. At the end of the chapter, TikTok is explored to familiarize the reader with the platform, its specialties, and its significance regarding the research topic.

2.1 Social Media Marketing

Social networking sites, often known simply as social media, are websites where people can create public or at least partially private profiles. In social media, users can list their friends or connections and see who their friends are connected to. Each social media platform may call these connections by different names, and they may work slightly differently from one site to another. (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Social media is a highly topical subject. Over 4.8 billion people worldwide use social media platforms, with each user averaging an of 2.5 hours of use time on them daily (Gole & Tidke, 2015). Perhaps one of the most obvious signs is the way how the smartphone usage of people has increased substantially during the last few years (C. L. Wang, 2021). While social media has often been considered the place of the young generations, it is no longer restricted to only this group of people (Bolton et al., 2013).

While social media has significantly affected consumers' lives, it has also affected companies' marketing. In traditional marketing and media, big media corporations had the power to decide on behalf of consumers what was worth watching and, thus, what would become popular (Broxton, Interian, Vaver & Wattenhofer, 2013). Internet and social media have shifted this power to consumers (Knossenburg, Nogueira & Chimenti, 2016).

Branded content is present on practically all significant SNSs nowadays, and social media marketing platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn have changed the communication environment for brands, individuals, and organizations (Sanne &

Wiese, 2018). Companies use social media to promote and spread brand information (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011), and to seek connecting with customers and enhance their brand communication (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015). Social media has enabled a new level of engagement and interaction between the brand and consumers (Ashley & Tuten, 2015) and offers them new ways of engaging with each other on a much deeper level than traditional media could offer (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015).

Social media platforms equip advertisers to reach wide-ranging audiences with powerful targeting tools (Alhabash, McAlister, Lou & Hagerstrom, 2015), and social media advertising is generally cheaper than traditional media (S. C. Chu et al., 2024). Nowadays, companies can precisely identify and satisfy their consumers' needs through the core functionalities of different social media services and aim to facilitate interaction to achieve cost savings in marketing activities (Rangaswamy et al., 2020). For example, personalized ads on social media are linked with improved brand loyalty and perceived quality (Shanahan, Tran & Taylor, 2019).

Social networking sites offer unseen opportunities for brands to create long-term, meaningful consumer relationships (S. C. Chu et al., 2024). The simple presence of a brand on social media can produce positive brand evaluations toward it, which can be boosted by posting and thus receiving likes and comments (Naylor, Lamberton & West, 2012). In comparison to other media forms, companies' social media communications are typically focused on efforts to build equity and primarily directed towards brand management and enhancing customer relationships (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins & Wiertz, 2013). Social media can bring brands closer to consumers, as they consider social media a more trustworthy source of information than traditional marketing communications (Karakaya & Barnes, 2010).

Sharing has become a vital perspective in today's social media marketing landscape, as it can reach vast audiences quickly and cheaply (Tellis et al., 2019). Online digital content offers a unique possibility for consumers to easily share what they like with others (Tellis et al., 2019). Digital marketing strategies have shifted emphasis from paid media to earned media, and earned media, especially peer-to-peer transmission on social media, is very influential in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors towards brands and products (Buchanan, Kelly, Yeatman & Kariippanon, 2018).

Viral marketing is one of the most apparent forms of earned media visibility, which uses existing social networks and encourages customers to share information about products and brands (Leskovec, Adamic & Huberman, 2007). As a result, many companies utilize viral marketing to promote their products and services using social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Souki et al., 2022). The prominence of digital technology, especially social media, has increased the viral marketing campaigns' importance by increasing their cost efficiency and enabling them to rapidly reach targeted audiences (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). Social media platforms have become a central part of viral marketing, as the community embedded in them makes spreading content more effortless than ever before (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). As a result, social media is currently the most important channel to enhance viral marketing (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021).

2.2 TikTok

TikTok is a social media platform where users can create, share, and watch short-form videos (Wahid et al., 2023). TikTok is owned by Chinese ByteDance, and was launched in 2017 (Wahid et al., 2023). Although being rather new platform compared to many other social media platforms, TikTok has seen a phenomenal rise ever since its global launch (Sheak & Abdulrazak, 2023), and has established its role as a critical player in the social media world (Wahid et al., 2023). Currently, TikTok has already over 1,5 billion users (Statista, 2024b), and it has become one of the fastest-growing social media platforms in the world (Wahid et al., 2023).

TikTok videos are traditionally short-form videos, ranging from a few seconds to a few minutes, which makes them more fitting to the mindset of Gen Z consumers (Wahid et al., 2023). Due to their short attention spans, Gen Z users generally prefer platforms prioritizing short, aesthetically pleasing, engaging, and activating content (Jambulingam et al., 2018), like TikTok. TikTok's short-form videos provide an easy and suitable form of entertainment for these people with short attention spans and a preference for dynamic and fast-paced content flow (Huss, 2023; Schmitt & Lancaster, 2019). Especially the length of the videos makes TikTok different from other video-based social media services, such as YouTube (Wahid et al., 2023).

TikTok represents a new form of marketing communication technology due to its unique features and operational methods (S. C. Chu et al., 2024). The algorithm is the most significant aspect setting TikTok apart from other social media services (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Whereas the content in other social media platforms is mainly built around the self-created network, in TikTok The algorithm determines what type of videos the user wants to watch, and shows it in the endlessly updating “For You” feed (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). In other words, users can start browsing content, and TikTok will show endless content that it expects users to like. For You feed is unique to each user (S. C. Chu et al., 2024), and the algorithm is used to identify consumers who are more likely to engage with the videos based on past behaviors (S. C. Chu et al., 2024), identified and learned interests and viewing history (Sheak & Abdulrazak, 2023). The algorithm provides an easy way to connect with people worldwide (Ortiz et al., 2023).

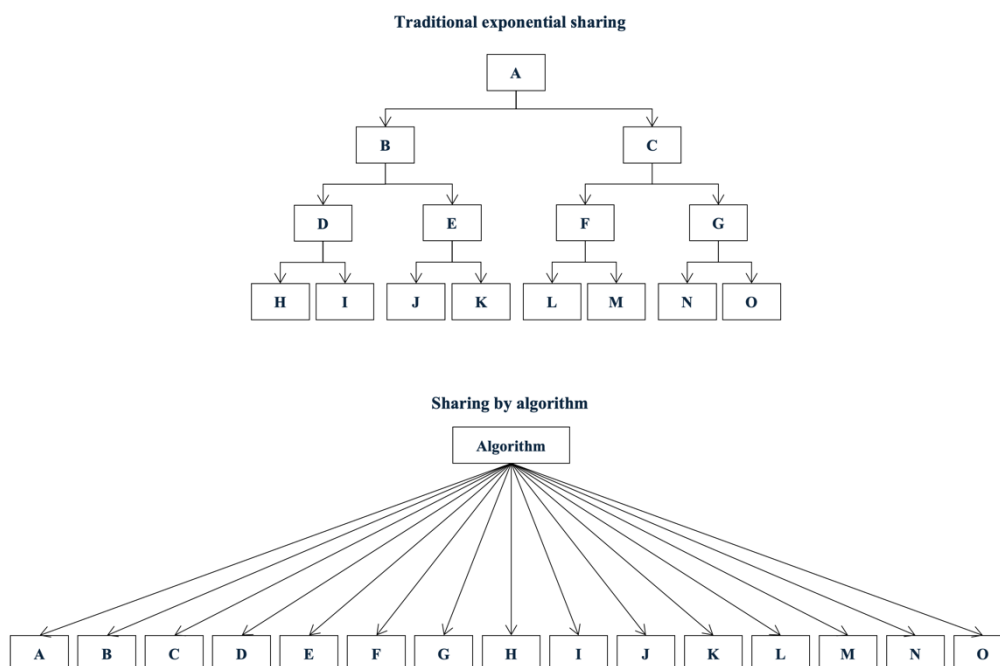


Figure 1 Traditional exponential sharing and sharing by algorithm

TikTok has been becoming increasingly popular also amongst companies and advertisers (Y. Wang, 2020), and it has become a powerful marketing tool for them (Wahid et al., 2023). TikTok attracts many brands with its lively interactive environment and large user base (Wahid et al., 2023). Brands have turned to TikTok

to sponsor videos by top creators and influencers and to place ads between user content (S. C. Chu et al., 2024). An algorithmic content feed enables personalized brand videos, which offers significant opportunities for advertisers (S. C. Chu et al., 2024). Algorithm and artificial intelligence-based operating ways show consumers more relevant content, resulting in stronger liking and engagement (Xiao, Wang & Wang, 2019). TikTok's content model enables sending more fascinating and easy-to-remember advertising messages and actions to users, which in addition to TikTok's interactive nature can explain why TikTok's content model successfully connects brands and users (Ortiz et al., 2023). TikTok engages its users exponentially more than other social media services, enabling higher levels of attraction and engagement – TikTok has a consumer engagement rate of 15%, the highest among the leading SNS platforms (Ortiz et al., 2023).

TikTok has become especially popular among younger consumers, that are below the age of 30 (Statista, 2024a), and the platform has been growing by far the most compared to other, more traditional, social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram (Gottfried, 2024). Over 60 % of TikTok users comprise of Gen Z users (Huss, 2023). This demographic situation has provided companies an excellent opportunity to use TikTok to reach and connect, especially with younger customers. Previously, users consciously differentiated between firm-generated and user-generated sources of information (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015). However, Gen Z consumers want to avoid annoying advertising but integrate it into their content flow and expect brand co-creation (M. Cho, Bonn & Han, 2018). Via its dynamic content, TikTok provides Generation Z users with a higher engagement rates and different kind of sense of connection than other social media platforms (Ortiz et al., 2023).

TikTok also differs from more traditional social media channels in terms of content. Whereas users of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram use them to stay updated on the latest information and happenings (Babić Rosario, de Valck & Sotgiu, 2020), the users of TikTok are more focused on viral memes and videos (Zeng & Abidin, 2021), and want to be entertained (Sheak & Abdulrazak, 2023). The importance of the content being interesting is highlighted in the fast-paced world of TikTok, where content must hold the users' attention long enough and prevent them from immediately swiping up to the next video (Sheak & Abdulrazak, 2023). Due to the time constraint, brands must

be creative and efficient when creating content and messages to the consumers (Wahid et al., 2023). For example, tutorials or joining trends are highlighted as possible methods (Wahid et al., 2023).

All the aspects mentioned above make TikTok a lucrative platform for viral marketing. Traditionally, only a small proportion of social media users, that are exposed to viral ads, actually contribute to the diffusion of the ad (Huh, Kim, Rath, Lu & Srivastava, 2020), but in TikTok, the algorithm can “do the sharing” by itself – thus the virality could expand to the next level, as it might not be purely dependant on sharing behaviour of the users. When combined with the platform’s immense popularity and engaging environment, many preconditions of the virality are met. Overall, TikTok offers a simple tool to create branded video content, which is also easy to share on various social media other than TikTok (S. C. Chu et al., 2024).

While this study focuses on TikTok, other social media companies have recently launched competitors with similar features, such as short-form video content and algorithm-based operations. These services include Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts. Due to similar characteristics regarding content and operating ways, the research findings of this study could be generalized beyond TikTok.

3 VIRAL MARKETING

This chapter presents the background of viral marketing phenomena by deeply delving into the previous literature. The first subchapter describes and defines viral marketing and presents how the definition has developed over the years. The following subchapters clarify concepts such as WOM and eWOM, look at somewhat mixed uses of the terms viral marketing and viral advertising and describe viral marketing's benefits. All this provides a comprehensive understanding of the concept of viral marketing.

3.1 Viral marketing definition

The concept of viral marketing is relatively new, as the basic idea was presented for the first time only three decades ago. Despite its relatively young age, the definition of viral marketing has developed and changed significantly over the years.

According to Kaplan & Haenlein (2011) and Reichstein & Bruschi (2019), Rayport (1996) was one of the first to present the idea of viral marketing. However, most researchers seem to agree that the term viral marketing was introduced by Jurvetson and Draper in 1997 (Cruz & Fill, 2008; Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011; Porter & Golan, 2006) to describe how free email service Hotmail advertised itself on each message with the appendix "*Get your private, free e-mail from Hotmail at <http://www.hotmail.com>*" (Porter & Golan, 2006).

Since Jurvetson and Draper's work, viral marketing has gained popularity in practice and research. As the research has advanced, varying definitions have also been presented. Helm (2000) defined viral marketing as a communication and distribution concept based on transmitting digital content between customers who send it to their social sphere by e-mail. The recipient is also encouraged to disseminate this content. R. F. Wilson (2000) described viral marketing as any strategy that encourages users to transmit content to create the potential for exponential growth, similar to a biological virus. Welker (2002) defines viral marketing as strategies that allow a more effortless, accelerated, and cost-reduced transmission of messages by creating environments for

self-replicating, exponentially increasing the message's diffusion, spiritualization, and impact.

Dobele, Toleman & Beverland (2005) outline that viral marketing is a strategy where people forward messages to others on their e-mail lists or tie advertisements into or at the end of messages. They also describe how viral marketing is designed to, either by design or by accident, encourage individuals to pass along favorable or compelling marketing information they receive. Porter & Golan (2006) defined viral advertising as unpaid peer-to-peer communication of provocative content from an identified sponsor using the Internet to persuade or influence an audience to pass the content to others.

Technical development has affected the definition of viral marketing (Reichstein & Bruschi, 2019). In earlier definitions, email was highlighted as a critical sharing medium, but today, social networks rather than email are used to disseminate content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011; Reichstein & Bruschi, 2019). Widespread use of social media has even pushed the idea of viral marketing to a whole new level (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011), which has also been reflected in more recent definitions.

According to (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011), viral marketing is defined as electronic word-of-mouth where some form of marketing message of a company, brand, or product is transmitted in an exponentially growing way—often by social media applications. A similar definition comes from (Hinz, Skiera, Barrot, Beck 2011), who define viral advertising as a form of advertising where the advertiser deliberately crafts and sends out advertising content designed to be shared or spread by consumers within their social networks.

Possibly the latest and most widely acknowledged definition providing comprehensive understanding and coverage to today's media landscape is the one by Reichstein & Bruschi (2019), which defines viral marketing as marketing strategies that permit exponential distribution of content in network-based channels in the shortest time with comparatively little effort and additionally generate measurable added value through the content, which leads to a high cost-benefit effect.

In other words, from a practical perspective, viral marketing is used to distribute content widely (Reichstein & Bruschi, 2019). Helm (2000) suggests that the target of viral marketers is to maximize reach. Virality means achieving a large number of views in a short time period due to sharing (Tellis et al., 2019)—thus, virality is often defined and measured simply by the number of views or shares that it gets.

Traditionally, sharing has been emphasized as a vital measure in digital marketing (Akpınar & Berger, 2017). Virality is not the number of views but rather the number of shares that content receives (Dubal & Bhatia, 2022). However, as times change and platforms develop, it is essential to consider possible further changes regarding this topic. For example, while previous definitions highlight the importance of sharing, the latest definition by Reichstein & Bruschi (2019) covers a broader and more comprehensive approach that generally talks about distribution strategies rather than just sharing. The change is well presented in the study subject of this research, as TikTok is a platform where the content spreads primarily by algorithm and not person-to-person sharing.

Thus, it could be better to focus more on overall engagement rather than just shares. According to Wahid et al. (2023), Social Media Engagement (SME) is vital for brands as it influences business performance from critical angles. Social Media Engagement activities range from least to most active as follows: consuming (such as viewing), contributing (such as liking and sharing), and creating (such as commenting) (Dolan, Conduit, Fahy & Goodman, 2016). While most of the literature used in this research discusses and studies sharing, it should be considered if the same results could be generalized to cover engagement - not precisely the same things might hold regarding consumption and engagement, but the change from sharing to engagement should not be exclusionary in any ways: if the consumer would be willing to share the content, the threshold for lower engagement levels, such as viewing and liking, has been surpassed, which again can signal algorithm that this is interesting content. The higher the engagement with the content, i.e., amount of shares, likes, and comments, the more the brand perceptions are affected (Li, Ongpaucio, Therese & Rubante, 2022).

However, in video advertising, ad effectiveness inevitably also translates into a view amounts and sharing behavior (Porter & Golan, 2006). However, whether talking

about views or shares, they are, after all, quantitative measures that can provide insights into the popularity of viral content but not reflect the true success of the marketing campaign and its effects on the brand (Wendt et al., 2016). While the amounts of views, likes and shares can act as a virality driver and create increased virality (Moran, Muzellec & Johnson, 2020), measuring these kinds of superficial statistics can be argued only to determine the activity level around the content, and not the true success of a viral campaign. Just sharing does not impact brand equity in viral marketing (Chinelato et al., 2023). To measure the marketing success of viral marketing and discover brand-related effects, the perceptions and communications need to be studied on a deeper level, and it's required to study viral marketing's effects on brand presence, brand awareness, brand image, and reputation (Wendt et al., 2016).

3.2 Viral marketing vs. viral advertising

In the literature on viral marketing, some researchers even use the terms "viral marketing" and "viral advertising" interchangeably (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004), whereas others treat them differently (Golan & Zaidner, 2008; Porter & Golan, 2006). To avoid confusion, some clarification is needed.

Just like the terms "advertising" and "marketing" are different, so are the terms "viral marketing" and "viral advertising," (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011). The relationship between viral marketing and viral advertising can be seen similarly to the positions of traditional advertising in the marketing mix: viral advertising is a part of the larger field of viral marketing (Porter & Golan, 2006). Viral marketing represents online and offline marketing activities that influence consumers to pass along commercial messages to other consumers. Viral advertising, on the other hand, is unpaid electronic (e-mail, Web, or social media) distribution of business or user-generated advertisements from consumer to consumer based on ad content likeability, entertainment, and controversial characteristics. (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011). Thus, Viral marketing can be seen as a broader framework encompassing a wide array of electronic word-of-mouth strategies to encourage brand-related online peer-to-peer communication (Golan & Zaidner, 2008).

In addition to the terms viral marketing and advertising, other names have been developed to describe viral marketing. These include for example: buzz marketing (Thomas, 2004), Word-of-Mouse (Freeman & Chapman, 2008; Goldenberg & Muller, 2001; Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011), Stealth marketing (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004), and referral marketing (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). Each term might have a slightly varying perspective on the topic, as they were developed when the research on viral marketing was still taking its shape. However, all these terms refer to the same basic viral marketing phenomenon (Knossenburg, Nogueira & Chimenti, 2016).

Despite various terms and definitions used by different studies, this study will primarily use the term viral marketing over viral advertising to describe viral actions utilized by companies. While the research mainly studies viral advertising content, the choice of viral marketing ensures a broader coverage of viral marketing strategies that companies might use as part of their marketing.

3.3 WOM and eWOM

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication means non-paid person-to-person communication regarding, i.e., a product or a company, which usually happens orally (Arndt, 1967; Golan & Zaidner, 2008; Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011). As apparent from the viral marketing definitions presented at the beginning of the chapter, viral marketing is often referred to together with Word-of-Mouth (WOM). Thus, it's helpful to study it too briefly.

Traditional WOM has been discussed and researched long before viral marketing was established (Reichstein & Bruschi, 2019). Many companies aim to utilize WOM marketing, as it is generally more cost efficient and effective than traditional advertising (Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels, 2009), as consumers naturally tend to share their views, preferences, and experiences with others (Akpınar & Berger, 2017). WOM has been proven to influence consumer attitudes and behaviors substantially compared to traditional advertising (Golan & Zaidner, 2008), as messages that come from known sources are taken as more credible – and social networks are often seen as known and trusted sources (Akar & Topçu, 2011; Chiu, Hsieh, Kao & Lee, 2007; Phelps, Lewis,

Mobilio, Perry & Raman, 2004). WOM is one of the most important, if not the most important, sources of information for the consumer (Arndt, 1967).

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is a traditional WOM-like communication that takes place in digital networks (Golan & Zaidner, 2008). eWOM can be described as an advancement (J. K. Hsieh et al., 2012) or a new dimension of traditional WOM enabled by the internet and social media (Kusumawati, Fitri, & Y2019). eWOM offers exponential growth possibilities compared to conventional WOM because it happens in a digital environment, unlike traditional face-to-face information exchange (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). The Internet adds virality potential to WOM through exponential growth possibilities (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011), and social media provides an ideal WOM channel for content distribution (Wendt et al., 2016).

The relation of viral marketing to eWOM generates divided approaches. In the literature viral marketing and WOM are often described together (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Dobele et al., 2005; Ferguson, 2008; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011), which has led to that viral marketing is often called synonyms with eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011; Porter & Golan, 2006). Klopper (2002) even described viral marketing as a reinterpretation or a buzzword of the English expression “word-of-mouth.”

However, while eWOM and viral marketing are closely related, it can be argued that they are not precisely the same thing, and more recent literature has often separated the two. Some describe viral marketing and eWOM as part of each other. For example, (Huh et al., 2020) describe viral marketing as rather a part of eWOM marketing and can be seen as a marketer-generated eWOM strategy. Puriwat & Tripopsakul (2021) explain that viral marketing is a marketing strategy that combines internet technology with word-of-mouth tactics. Others describe them as cause and effect. For example, Cruz & Fill (2008) explain that viral marketing has emerged as an electronic form of WOM and involves passing on of content such as news, information or entertainment to another person. Viral marketing utilizes the mechanisms and benefits of eWOM, such as broad reach and higher acceptance (Hinz et al., 2011; Phelps et al., 2004). Ferguson (2008), on the other hand, describes that viral marketing generates WOM.

In addition to previous definitions, viral marketing can also be described as a hybrid form of traditional advertising combined with eWOM, as viral ads utilize WOM's fundamental principles and strengths and maintain the brand's message creation role like in traditional advertising (Hayes & King, 2014). Firm-generated WOM can be seen as a fusion between traditional advertising and consumer-based WOM, characterized as being firm-initiated but consumer-implemented (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004).

No matter the definition, WOM and eWOM are significant for viral marketing, as while consumers often find unsolicited commercial messages from companies irritating, these messages can be considered favorably when coming from a member of the message receiver's social network (Phelps et al., 2004). However, it can be argued that WOM is not highlighted as much in the algorithm-based TikTok environment, where sharing doesn't play as vital role. Thus, it can be reasoned not to deep dive into the topic with the scope of this study.

3.4 Benefits of viral marketing

Viral marketing has risen as a marketing strategy to gain a foothold in today's overcrowded media space (Huh et al., 2020). Viral marketing is appealing to advertisers as it enables a great fit in the current era of consumer control, giving the consumer control over whether an ad is worth watching or sharing (Petrescu et al., 2015; Wen et al., 2022). Viral marketing relies on social media's natural audience attracting to the marketing content instead of providing traditional ads that interrupt the publisher's content (Quesenberry & Coolsen, 2019). Viral marketing is controlled more by viewer pull rather than advertiser push (J. Huang et al., 2013). Hence, viral marketing can be seen as an acceptable form of advertising, and consumers appear to constantly be more and more comfortable with online viral advertising campaigns that motivate them to share a marketing message with others (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011). Viral ads that have been shared or viewed many times are usually more accepted and trusted by consumers and, thus, are less likely to be dismissed or ignored compared to other forms of advertising (Hayes & King, 2014).

Viral marketing is cheaper than other forms of marketing, and the campaigns cause very little expense to the firms as the users carry the cost of forwarding the brand message (Dobele et al., 2005). Viral marketing can even be described as basically a free way to transmit advertising (Teixeira, Wedel & Peters, 2012; Tucker, 2015) and allows marketers to disseminate commercial content to vast groups of potential buyers in a matter of days without the high costs associated with traditional media (Nelson-Field, Riebe & Newstead, 2013; Welker, 2002). Viral marketing enables companies to promote their products and services with meager budgets while reaching vast awareness (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011).

As described in the previous chapter, viral marketing has become even more effective than traditional marketing, as consumers increasingly trust on word-of-mouth and discussions about a product to guide their buying decisions. Relying on consumer-to-consumer propagation of product information and advertising content has become increasingly important and has been highlighted especially in the economically turbulent times (Segev & Fernandes, 2023), as it decreases the costs of media buying and increases reach and engagement (Tellis et al., 2019).

Successful ads don't just encourage consumers to share them but also to respond to them by, i.e., commenting on them (Tucker, 2015). Viral marketing is an excellent way to extend users' actions beyond content consumption. With viral marketing, marketers aim to produce video content that motivates viewers to engage with it through shares, likes, and comments, ultimately leading to increased content consumption, brand awareness, and engagement (Dubal & Bhatia, 2022).

Overall, viral marketing is an unconventional approach to marketing that favors small businesses and low-budget campaigns, provided that advertisers can develop distinctive and engaging messages and content (Porter & Golan, 2006). Effective and successful viral marketing delivers increased campaign reach, decreased ad avoidance, and generates earned media exposure for the company (S. Cho et al., 2014; Dobele et al., 2007; Eckler & Bolls, 2011).

4 CONTENT OF VIRAL VIDEO MARKETING

This chapter describes the content-related factors related to viral marketing. First, it studies what kind of subject matter provides virality. In addition, the chapter describes videos as a format of viral video marketing. After this chapter, the reader should have a comprehensive set of practical knowledge regarding what kind of content maximizes virality possibilities and why.

4.1 What type of content succeeds in viral marketing

Viral marketing is difficult – the success can be either a hit or a miss. Instead of paying for visibility, viral marketing content is designed to be transmitted by consumers-to-consumer through posting, sharing, or forwarding it (Tucker, 2015). Generating viral (mainly commercial) content can be challenging because, traditionally, consumers do not easily consume and share brand messages and ads on social media (Nelson-Field et al., 2013). While the importance of sharing vs. engagement can subject to interpretation in the TikTok environment, the same basic principle still holds: Brands need to know which content generates the most engagement on social media to utilize viral marketing effectively (Arica et al., 2022; Chen, Liu, Liu, Chang & Yen, 2022). Understanding how consumers' evaluations of viral advertisements affect their sharing is vital for successful viral marketing (Shehu, Bijmolt & Clement, 2016). If no one shares the content from the company or if the content leads to negative associations with the company, the benefits of social dissemination are lost (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Changes in brand assessments primarily depend on users' reception of marketing content and communications (Wendt et al., 2016), which also highlights the importance of content aspects. If consumers do not like the ad, it affects not only their attitude toward the ad or brand but also their intention to transmit the message (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011).

Reichstein and Bruschi (2019) describe the viewer's decision-making process in viral marketing as split into two phases: In the first phase, the user decides whether the content should be considered—watched in the case of viral marketing. In the second phase, the user chooses whether to interact with the content—share or engage in the context of viral marketing. Huang et al. (2013) simplify that when an individual is

exposed to viral advertisement, they will first generate either a positive or a negative attitude towards it and then choose whether to engage further with it or not. Huang et al. (2013) also add a third phase to the process: processing the embedded brand information.

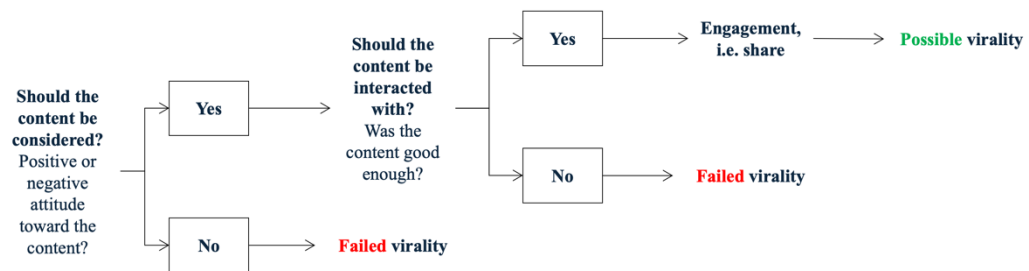


Figure 2 Engagement decision making process with viral marketing material

In the first phase, the user decides whether the content should be watched (Reichstein & Bruschi, 2019). Thus, first, the content must somehow be interesting (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Berger & Schwartz, 2011; J. Huang et al., 2013). Also, terms such as extraordinary (Porter & Golan, 2006), unique (Knossenburg et al., 2016), and memorable (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011) have been used to describe virality viable content. Knossenburg et al. (2016) describe that viral ads should be surprising and engaging to watch, and Dobelet al. (2007) even list that surprise is the primary emotion leading to virality. Only after considering the content worth watching, also known as interesting, the further engagement could occur which is determined by the subject matters of the content.

The content must evoke emotions, as emotional arousal increases social transmission and drives virality (Berger, 2011; Berger & Milkman, 2012; Dafonte-Gómez, 2014; Dobelet al., 2007; J. K. Hsieh et al., 2012; Nelson-Field et al., 2013). Emotional engagement can also reduce ad avoidance (Campbell, Mattison Thompson, Grimm & Robson, 2017). Emotional aspects can help advertisers produce ads that tell a full story and create drama, which has been proven to be essential characteristics of viral ads (Quesenberry & Coolson, 2019; Tellis et al., 2019).

The strength of the emotional reaction (Brown, Bhadury & Pope, 2010), the kind of emotions, and the emotional tone of viral ads (Wen et al., 2022) affect the virality. Messages sparking strong emotions, such as humor, fear, sadness, or inspiration, are most likely forwarded (Phelps et al., 2004). Strong feelings of activation or excitement increase sharing (Guadagno, Rempala, Murphy & Okdie, 2013). Nikolinakou & King (2018) suggest that eliciting strong reactions can produce more sharing for ad videos. Berger & Milkman (2012) found that high-arousal content is shared more than low-arousal content. Their findings are supported by Nelson-Field et al. (2013), who found that high-arousal emotions are the primary driver of viral video sharing. Also, Guadagno et al. (2013) found that videos showing strong affective responses were more likely to be shared compared to non-emotional videos. Berger & Milkman (2012) provide an example, describing that relaxing advertisements are less viral than advertisements that amuse the viewer, as they do not activate them as much.

People generally use social media to satisfy their entertainment needs (Dolan et al., 2016); thus, entertaining content has a significant role in virality. Funny and entertaining content is highlighted, especially within the positive content (Tucker, 2015). Funny content is especially shared on social media, increasing overall sharing (Dobele et al., 2007; Phelps et al., 2004; Souki et al., 2022). Humor influences attitudes toward sharing positively (J. K. Hsieh et al., 2012). Fun is vital to any viral campaign (Dobele et al., 2005). The funnier the consumer perceives the ad, the more likely it is to be shared (Petrescu et al., 2015). Entertainment values increase the sharing of content (Phelps et al., 2004). Campo et al. (2013) indicated that humor significantly predicted sharing a campaign with others. Akpınar & Berger (2017) summarized that entertainment stimulates viewers' emotions and feelings and fosters the intention and desire to share videos.

Overall, positive and pleasant emotions increase the intention to share (Eckler & Bolls, 2011; J. K. Hsieh et al., 2012; Nikolinakou & King, 2018; Southgate, Westoby & Page., 2010). Enjoyment is a key element for viral videos, and Positive content is shared up to 30 % more than content that causes other reactions (Nelson-Field et al., 2013). Positive emotions, such as amusement, excitement, inspiration, and warmth, positively affect sharing (Tellis et al., 2019). Also, Nikolinakou & King (2018) noted that emotions of awe and affection impacted viral video sharing positively. Pleasure

and arousal positively affect sharing (Wen et al., 2022). High likeability positively affected consumers' intention to share (Shehu et al., 2016). Botha & Reyneke (2013) even concluded that content is only shared if it is associated with positive emotions. Users' attitudes toward online advertisements must be positive to generate an intention to share them with their network (J. Huang et al., 2013).

While positive content is more viral than negative content (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Dafonte-Gómez, 2014), also negative emotions can increase virality (Nelson-Field et al., 2013). Berger & Milkman (2012) argue that while many marketers might shy away from creating negative emotions awaking commercials, they could lead to more sharing if they include activating elements. Nelson-Field et al. (2013) found that highly arousing videos eliciting highly positive emotions, such as humor, inspiration, astonishment, and exhilaration, were shared the most, but also videos that elicited highly negative emotions were shared increasingly.

To capture attention, entertain, and stand out from the mass, viral ads often diverge from traditional execution style practices (Segev & Fernandes, 2023), and provocative content has traditionally been a significant part of viral marketing. Porter & Golan (2006) describe that viral advertising relies more on provocative content than traditional advertising. Porter & Golan (2006) even emphasize the importance of outrageous content, such as sexuality, humor, violence, and nudity, in achieving virality. Brown et al. (2010) also agree on the relevance of outrageous content and highlight comedic violence as an element of it.

While the significance of provocative content is highlighted, so are also the risks that it includes. The difference between provocative and inappropriate is often a very thin line (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Tellis et al. (2019) note that people might not share humorous ads if they suspect others might find the humor offensive. Tucker (2015) also highlights that while outrageousness can induce consumers to share the advertisement, it can also negatively affect ad persuasiveness.

Informational ads are shared less than emotional ads (Akpınar & Berger, 2017), as information-heavy content is usually less entertaining or interesting than emotional content (Petrescu et al., 2015). People are more likely to share entertaining content

than communicate, i.e., product information or purchase recommendations (Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech & Philippot, 1998). Emotional messages, including drama, mood, music, and other emotion-eliciting strategies, are more likely to be shared than informative ones, which often primarily focus on product features (Akpınar & Berger, 2017). Facts can be uninteresting and irritating, especially in cases of familiar and well-known brands (Tellis et al., 2019).

However, informative appeals can also be liked by consumers and seen as beneficial. For example, the sharing might not be reduced in risky contexts. (Tellis et al., 2019). An informative ad can provide essential information that helps consumers make better purchase decisions and thus reduce the associated risks with the product and brand (Moldovan, Steinhart & Lehmann, 2019). Wahid et al. (2023) even found that informational content generally generates higher SME, i.e., likes, shares, and comments, than emotional content.

Generally, noncommercial content is shared more than advertising content (Nelson-Field et al., 2013). When viral advertisement looks too much like an advertisement, the sharing likelihood will decrease (J. S. Huang & Zhou, 2016), as consumers often present distrust towards advertising and don't usually want to feel that they are advertised towards. The more the ad seems like a blunt attempt to sell, the fewer people will share it (Tucker, 2015). Awareness of persuasion negatively influences a viral ad's forwarding intentions (J. K. Hsieh et al., 2012; Quesenberry & Coolson, 2019).

A key guideline for online video advertisers is to make sure the video does not clearly resemble an advertisement, as this can raise negative reactions from viewers and significantly diminish their willingness to share the video (J. K. Hsieh et al., 2012). Thus, marketers should disguise the persuasive intent to avoid persuasion knowledge and, thus, detachment effect toward the ad (J. K. Hsieh et al., 2012). Videos that try to mask being promotional content by, e.g., being entertaining (sometimes called Viral stealth videos, VSV) often gain much more attention and positive reception compared to ones directly advertising the product (product advertising videos, PAV) (Wendt et al., 2016).

Another significant factor that has not been covered here is the effect that the brand of the branded content has on virality. This aspect will be covered in the following chapter, which covers brands in viral marketing.

Despite understanding the content factors that affect virality, there is no guarantee of successful virality – plain good old luck is also needed (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Virality is often portrayed as a random phenomenon where marketers have little control (Dobele et al., 2005).

4.2 Videos as a part of viral marketing

In 2022, 82% of Internet traffic was caused by video content (Cisco, 2019). Consumers are heavily engaged with all types of videos on the internet (Eckler & Bolls, 2011), and social video advertising is one of the fastest-growing advertisement segments today (Tucker, 2015). According to estimates, ad spending in the video advertising market is expected to reach US\$191.3bn in 2024 and expand to US\$241.9bn by 2028 (Statista, 2023).

Viral advertising videos are a prominent form of viral marketing (Quesenberry & Coolson, 2019), and viral video marketing refers to a process where video-based are used as a medium of viral marketing (J. Huang et al., 2013). With the explosive growth of social media in recent years, companies have been using viral video marketing to disseminate their product and brand information (J. Huang et al., 2013). Marketers are increasingly utilizing the diffusion of video to gain visibility in the cluttered social media space (Wen et al., 2022). It is forecasted that digital video consumed on social media platforms will keep growing (Quesenberry & Coolson, 2019).

A successful viral video campaign can offer marketers even more extended campaign reach, reduced advertising avoidance, and earned brand publicity (Dobele et al., 2007; Eckler & Bolls, 2011; Nelson-Field et al., 2013; Southgate et al., 2010). Marketers use social video to extend campaign reach and penetrate the saturated media landscape (Nelson-Field et al., 2013). Online video ads offer higher brand recall than non-video ad formats, as they are seen as much more compelling (Lee, Ham & Kim, 2013).

The increased virality potential of videos rests on their capability to stand out from the clutter and engage the consumer or viewer in a meaningful and entertaining way (Dubal & Bhatia, 2022). Videos engage audiences on very different levels than images and texts (Appiah, 2006) and have been proven to be a much more efficient type of media than texts, photos, and static posts (Souki et al., 2022). Videos can showcase a wide variety of verbal and nonverbal communication codes (Wendt et al., 2016), and multimedia effects positively influence sharing intentions and attitudes toward the content (J. K. Hsieh et al., 2012). Videos are much more capable of evoking emotions than other forms of media (Wendt et al., 2016), and thus, videos can attain greater attention (J. K. Hsieh et al., 2012). Videos are especially effective with younger generations: Teenagers typically have short attention spans, especially for reading, but they can remain engaged for longer periods with interactive content like videos (Smith, 2019)

The objective is to generate content that enables engagement beyond the surface with the audience, thus making a video viral (Dubal & Bhatia, 2022). Video format's increased possibility to exhibit communication codes and evoke emotions enables marketers an efficient format to tell stories and include elements of drama in their commercials (Wendt et al., 2016) – Ads containing drama are easier to process and hence more likely to wake more intense emotions than information-focused ads. Drama-including ads are more engaging and enjoyable, as the plot will likely keep viewers interested, and the more the plot evoked feelings of surprise, the higher the viewer's interest, engagement, and emotional arousal were (Tellis et al., 2019).

Quesenberry & Coolsen (2019) found that videos with full story development gained more average shares and views than videos with less-developed stories. Shehu et al. (2016) support this by concluding that the beginning, peak, and end are the most critical parts of the viral ad video, which affect its sharing. They also emphasize that each part of the story has an important mission: The beginning gets the viewer interested and is vital to get them consuming the ad, but the end is most important because a story is more worth of sharing if the end and outcome are unknown. High likability at the beginning and the end of the video was important regarding forwarding intentions, but the likability at the end produced the most significant effect on the brand and the product (Shehu et al., 2016).

While the story's development and the depth of drama can increase virality, the length of the video must also be considered. While length can improve storytelling and plot, it's vital to take the limited time and focus span of today's customer not to lose the viewer's interest (Tellis et al., 2019). However, the content should not be too short either, as it might not succeed in arousing strong emotions, leading to sharing and engagement (Tellis et al., 2019). Tellis et al. (2019) found that videos with moderate length (in their case, 1,2 to 1,7 minutes) get the most shares.

5 BRANDS AND VIRAL MARKETING

This chapter will lead to the core of this study, as it presents viral marketing in relation to brands. Brands have a two-dimensional role in viral marketing: brands are affected by viral marketing, but brands also affect content virality. As viral ads originate from the brand, it's vital to understand the brand's role in the sharing process (Hayes & King, 2014). The first subchapter will study how the brand in viral marketing content affects the virality mechanisms and sharing. The second subchapter turns the proposition to the opposite and studies how viral marketing affects brands. The third subchapter highlights risks for brands associated with viral marketing.

5.1 Brand's effect on viral marketing

Generally, noncommercial content is shared more than viral advertising content (Nelson-Field et al., 2013), as described in previous chapters. However, the visibility of brands is vital for marketing's efficiency. Thus, it's crucial to know how and when the brand information should be embedded into the viral video advertisement (J. Huang et al., 2013). When analyzing brands' effect on viral video marketing, two perspectives can be recognized: associations linked to the brand and the visibility of the brand.

In today's world, brands actively participate in social media discussion and interaction (Hess & Story, 2005). Consumers share information, such as online and viral videos, about their favorite brands by actively participating in brand communities on the SNSs (Kim, Kang, Choi & Sung, 2016; C. L. Wang, 2021). However, the effect of recognized branding on the virality of content is two-fold. Research has found that viewers' intention to share might be enhanced or reduced when brand information is embedded into the interesting content (J. Huang et al., 2013).

Brand familiarity has an effect on sharing. Low brand familiarity and low brand relevance affect sharing positively (J. S. Huang & Zhou, 2016). In these cases, viewers will treat brand information as a secondary or peripheral factor, enhancing their learning and memory of the brand (Garretson & Burton, 2005). High brand familiarity and brand relevance act as negative factors for forwarding in viral marketing, because

brand familiarity activates consumers' brand cognition, and as a result, viral advertisements will more closely resemble actual advertisements, which again will decrease the desire to share (J. Huang et al., 2013). Thus, for brands that consumers are familiar with, viral marketing might not lead to expected virality (J. S. Huang & Zhou, 2016). However, also opposing results have been reported: (Petrescu et al., 2015) reported that consumers showed no differences between ads coming from unknown and ones from known sources, and thus concluded that pre-existing brand awareness should not affect virality.

Beyond familiarity, the pre-existing relationship that the viewer has with the brand has an effect on sharing and virality. Hayes & King (2014) report that strong brand relationships positively affect sharing. Consumers who possess strong ties to the advertiser are more likely to have a role in the success of viral ads (Vázquez-Casielles, Suárez-Álvarez & Del Río-Lanza, 2013). Closer consumer-brand relationships should most likely lead to more sharing of brand content (Huh et al., 2020). Attitude toward the brand significantly impacts sharing activity and the effectiveness of viral advertisement (J. Huang et al., 2013; Ketelaar et al., 2016), but the interest in the brand does not necessarily affect sharing (Southgate et al., 2010).

Beyond brand knowledge and awareness, the second brand factor is related to the amount of branding appearing in a viral video ad. As already described, awareness of persuasion negatively affects the sharing intentions of a viral ad (J. K. Hsieh et al., 2012), and when a viral advertisement looks too much like an advertisement, the sharing likelihood will decrease (J. S. Huang & Zhou, 2016). Brand placement and visibility have a big part in this.

Prominent brand placement in viral marketing content generally hurts sharing (Tellis et al., 2019), might lower the credibility of the content (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021), cause feelings of subliminal advertising, and even cause feelings of irritation, rejection and negative attitudes towards the brand (J. K. Hsieh et al., 2012; Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). "Persuasion knowledge" and too prominent of a brand presentation can cause consumers to disengage or even counterargue the persuasive message (Teixeira et al., 2012). When consumers recognize a connection between the content and the brand, they may perceive the content as an advertisement, regardless

of their familiarity with the brand, which can reduce their likeliness to share it (J. S. Huang & Zhou, 2016). If viewers resist the ad due to persuasion knowledge, they will most likely not share or engage with the ad (Tellis et al., 2019), leading to missed virality potential. If the consumer recognizes covert marketing attempts, also known as stealth marketing, it can significantly decrease trust and commitment toward the brand (Ashley & Leonard, 2009). Recognizing a covert marketing message lowers the trust and hurts the long-term relationship with the brand (Milne, Rohm & Bahl, 2009).

Consumers tend to favor content where the marketer's involvement is 'invisible' and doesn't include recognizable branding elements (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). However, in these cases, the content's marketing effectiveness is nearly nonexistent (Wendt et al., 2016). Thus, the challenge is to include the brand in the viral video ad in a way that benefits the brand but doesn't lower user acceptance. To benefit from viral marketing, the viral marketing content should also integrate with the rest of the brand (Southgate et al., 2010), and thus recognizable branding is also required in viral marketing to provide any value to the brand.

Viral content should integrate the brand into the narrative, either directly or indirectly, to make sure that consumers recognize the link between the content and the brand. As a solution, Akpınar & Berger (2017) describe "valuable virality," which means content that gets shared but also benefits the brand. Valuable virality conveys both emotions but also the brand, and it occurs when the brand is made into an integral part of the story – when the brand is integral to the ad narrative, the ad feels less manipulative, and the emotion-eliciting strategies result in more favorable reception, towards the ad and the brand. (Akpınar & Berger, 2017). While overly strong or blatant brand presence is linked to lower shares, making the brands integral to the content does not reduce sharing as long as the consumers are positively disposed to the ad content (Akpınar & Berger, 2017).

However, once again also opposing answers has been found. Nelson-Field et al. (2013) reported that the amount of branding that is presented in a viral ad video is not a deterrent to sharing. Southgate et al. (2010) suggest that strong branding can even lead to more viral viewings. Wendt et al. (2016) even describe that sometimes, recognition of advertisement intention can lead to a positive assessment of the content – this can

be explained by strong brand integration, which is a sign of well-planned content. This can suggest that it's about how the brand presents itself in the content, and that marketers can avoid negative consumer perceptions and reactions to content by finding a balance between the branding elements and the quality of the content.

5.2 Viral Marketing's effects on brands

Companies use viral marketing for multiple purposes. Viral marketing goals include promoting products and services, interacting with customers, or improving brand recognition and value (Arica et al., 2022; M. T. Liu, Xue & Liu., 2021). However, the main goal of viral marketing is to affect brands positively (Chinelato et al., 2023). And for that, viral marketing offers a versatile toolbox – viral marketing is one of the most effective ways of communication amongst consumers and thus has the potential to multiply a brand's popularity (Chiu et al., 2007).

Successful viral marketing can reach millions of different kinds of consumers and motivate them to interact with the brand (Eckler & Bolls, 2011). Hence, viral marketing can provide brands with a significant jump-start to spread brand messages (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011). Effective viral marketing acts as a passageway, linking brands with consumers through additional channels and associations, offering the next level of brand engagement (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). Effective viral marketing campaigns connect efficiently with a wide audience and improve consumers' perceptions of the brand via the delivered content (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021).

Viral marketing affects brands on multiple levels of brand and consumer relationships. Viral marketing can be used to position brands, change brand image, and increase adoption rates and brand equity (Dobele et al., 2005; Souki et al., 2022). Overall, when consumers trust a brand and engage with it via viral marketing content, these interactions facilitate the development of a holistic brand experience (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). Thus, viral marketing enhances overall brand engagement. However, a more in-depth understanding of different branding aspects is required to provide more than a general description of brand effects.

Viral marketing aims to distribute the content as widely as possible, which makes it quite natural that viral marketing is especially related to enhancing brand awareness (Dobele et al., 2005; Taino, Rodrigues Cardoso & Luzzi Las Casas, 2021) brand recognition, and brand recall (Malodia, Dhir, Bilgihan, Sinha & Tikoo, 2022). Brand awareness refers to the ability of consumers to identify and recall a brand in their minds (Keller, 1993). Brand recall refers to the ability of consumers to identify a brand with or without a cue (Malodia et al., 2022).

Petrescu & Korgaonkar (2011) and Segev & Fernandes (2023) describe that viral marketing's primary function is generating product or brand awareness, not transmitting traditional advertising messages or a list of information about the product. Compared to non-viral ads and traditional advertising, viral ads provide a significantly improved effect on consumer awareness, aided brand recall, unaided brand recall, and brand recognition (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021; Shirkhodae & Rezaee, 2013). Viral marketing is most suitable for achieving goals like creating brand awareness and enhancing a brand image, rather than prompting actions such as making a purchase (Segev & Fernandes, 2023).

Viral marketing has multiple features that benefit brand awareness. Frequent and repeated advertisement exposure increases the possibilities of brand recognition and brand recall in consumers' minds, well-suited to social media viral marketing (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011; Yoo, Donthu & Lee, 2000). Brown et al. (2010) describe that viral content leads to greater levels of brand recall and recognition because the mental activity linked to them is higher, and thus, information is held in working memory for a longer time. Top-of-the-mind awareness can be increased by viral marketing, as consumers are likely to easily remember a brand that was associated with creative, amusing, and intriguing content (Segev & Fernandes, 2023).

In today's market conditions, where new brands are continuously introduced to consumers, the need to boost brand awareness is crucial (Van-Tien Dao, Nhat Hanh Le, Ming-Sung Cheng & Chao Chen, 2014). Enhancing brand awareness improves the chances that a consumer will consider the brand when they evaluate options within a specific category (Langaro, Rita & Fátima Salgueiro, 2018). However, just the recognition and awareness of the brand doesn't create either positive or negative

assessments, so it can be seen as a neutral brand value (Wendt et al., 2016). Thus, further levels within the relationships also need to be considered.

Brands also utilize viral marketing to improve their brand image and create positive customer perceptions (X. Liu, Hu & Xu., 2017). Brand image represents how consumers view a brand based on the associations they have with it in their memory. These associations are various pieces of information connected to the brand in a person's mind, encapsulating what the brand means to them (Keller, 1993). Brand image is formed by brand awareness with certain strong associations linked to the brand (Yoo et al., 2000).

A company can improve its brand image based on positive perceptions of consumers to its message (Miquel-Romero & Adame-Sánchez, 2013), and viral marketing has been reported to be a powerful tool to affect brand image of a company (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Developing a brand image is essential, as a unique brand image enables consumers to differentiate the brand from competitors (Raji, Rashid & Ishak 2019). Thus, a properly developed brand image can influence customers' purchase decisions and brand preferences. Brand image is one aspect of the key ingredients of brand equity (Cheng, Tung, Yang & Chiang, 2019), and the more the brand image positively enhances, the more it can lead to brand loyalty from consumers (Bilgin & Kethüda, 2022).

It is also widely accepted that brand image is an essential factor in building brand trust (Bennett & Sargeant, 2005). Brand trust means the belief toward the brand fulfilling its promises based on consumers previous interactions and experiences (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). If consumers are satisfied with their interaction and exchange, this will lead to brand trust, leading to improved brand image, which again subsequently leads to increased brand loyalty (Hess & Story, 2005).

Brand loyalty is defined as a strong commitment to consistently choose and prefer a certain product or service in the future, regardless of different situations or marketing strategies encouraging a change or other options (Oliver, 2010, p. 23). In other words, brand loyalty indicates the intention to be loyal to a brand, and it is shown when consumers select amongst multiple brands (Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

One of the advertising goals is to make consumers loyal towards the brands they are familiar with (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Generally, advertising spending is positively linked to brand loyalty by reinforcing attitudes toward the brand and brand associations (Ha, John, Janda & Muthaly, 2011; Yoo et al., 2000) – and the same holds true also for viral marketing. Viral marketing enhances brand penetration and loyalty, leading to increased brand preference (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). Especially viral marketing in social media can be argued to have a high influence, as social media strengthens customer and brand loyalties toward a company (Laroche et al., 2013). Both firm-created and user-generated branded social media content positively impact brand loyalty and perceived brand quality (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015).

While all the previous aspects have been significant, brand equity is considered one of the most valuable things for a business (Cheng et al., 2019). Brand equity is defined as the effect that brand knowledge (brand awareness and brand image) which the consumer already possesses, has on the response to the marketing of the brand (Keller, 1993), or as a collection of assets (such as brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty) and liabilities associated with a brand, its name, and symbol, that contribute to or detract from the value of a product or service offered to a company or its customers (D. Aaker, 1991, 2000).

Companies can utilize viral marketing as a powerful tool for brand equity building (Dobele et al., 2007; Souki et al., 2022). Viral marketing is efficient, as it can affect multiple aspects that the brand equity is built upon such as brand awareness and brand image (Keller, 1993), brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (D. Aaker, 1991). Viral marketing is significant for brand's equity building, and sharing the commercial videos online impacts brand attachment positively and significantly, which again leads to brand equity (Souki et al., 2022). Brand communication through methods such as viral marketing on social media enhances brand equity by raising the probability that a brand will be considered by customers, therefore shortening the brand decision-making process and turning the occasional choices into habitual actions (Yoo et al., 2000).

While viral marketing as a phenomenon can have positive effects on multiple aspects of a brand, the change is not automatic. The key point of viral marketing is to make

consumers associate the feeling caused by the viral with the brand (Porter & Golan, 2006). These changes in brand assessments primarily depend on users' reception of marketing content and communications (J. Huang et al., 2013; Wendt et al., 2016). Emotions that the ad creates influence important advertising outcomes, such as attitudes toward the ad and the brand (Tellis et al., 2019). For example, liking a viral video advertisement presents a kind of affection transfer towards the brand and brand attitudes (J. Huang et al., 2013). Thus, to impact brand attitudes, the content must attach good memories to the brand; otherwise, it is just an act of charity by that brand (Southgate et al., 2010).

Emotional and informational content have different effects on engagement amounts, but also to the brand effects. Generally, the emotional aspects of the content are highlighted as well-functioning also with the branding aspects: the emotional tone of the viral advertisement has the strongest effect on the viewer's attitude toward the brand (Eckler & Bolls, 2011). Ads with a positive emotional tone can result in a more favorable attitude toward the ad and the brand (Eckler & Bolls, 2011), and humor can improve consumers' moods by creating joy and satisfaction, potentially transferring these feelings to the brand (Cline, Altsech & Kellaris, 2003). Even comedic violence has been noted to positively influence attitudes toward the integrated brand (Brown et al., 2010). Emotion-focused ads generally impact brands more than information-focused ads (Lee & Hong, 2016), but also informative content has been reported to boost brand evaluations (even significantly more than purely emotional content) by providing information about the product or the brand and feeling more transparent and less manipulative persuasion attempts (Akpınar & Berger, 2017). Wendt et al. (2016) described that content with direct and clear advertising points also evokes substantially more brand awareness – however, at the same time, the impact on brand assessment and other brand aspects can be rather mixed and not necessarily positive.

5.3 Risks for brands

Potential advantages of viral marketing offer multiple benefits to marketers (Wen et al., 2022). Careful and correct use of viral marketing can have significant cost-benefits for companies and help brands grow quickly and cheaply (D. A. Aaker, 2004; Reichstein & Bruschi, 2019). However, Viral marketing can be a double-edged sword

(Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021) – viral marketing carries more risks than traditional brand-building (D. A. Aaker, 2004; Reichstein & Brusch, 2019).

Producing successful viral content is often referred to as the most difficult to achieve marketing goal (Watts & Peretti, 2007). The success of viral marketing can be a hit or miss (Wen et al., 2022). Even if a theoretically perfect viral video is produced, there is no guarantee that it will go viral (Nelson-Field et al., 2013). However, the missed virality is the smallest of the risks.

Viral marketing campaigns can result in either strongly positive or negative outcomes (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). The same virality principles affect both positive and negative consequences of viral marketing: negative content about a company can spread like a fire in a matchbox, and the damage can be challenging to repair. Especially in an online context, the risks are highlighted: when shared online, negative comments, reviews, or experiences can be far more damaging (Arora & Predmore, 2013, p. 120). Unfortunately for the marketer, negative information often carries more weight and affects consumers' emotional responses more intensely than positive information (P. Wang, Sun & Peng, 2013). In the field of word-of-mouth communication, negative WOM has been found to spread much further and faster than positive WOM (Helm, 2000) – due to shared similarities with WOM, the same can be generalized to viral marketing.

The risks are highlighted especially with viral marketing, as it is often based on provocative, negative, or unconventional content. While these types of content can increase virality, they come with significant risks for the product and the brand (J. Huang et al., 2013; Reichstein & Brusch, 2019). In the quest to be sensational and thus viral, companies risk being so unconventional that they trigger negative reactions in the viewers. For example, Wendt et al. (2016) describe that negative perceptions or comments may sometimes foster popularity, but the increased popularity gone wrong can also have catastrophic effects on the brand and product. It is also important to remember that the content that consumers would share and engage with does not always go along with what a brand stands for (J. Huang et al., 2013). While some examples of “norm-violating” commercials have gained virality through negative content, little is known about the long-term consequences of highly provocative

negative appeals on the brand (Nelson-Field et al., 2013). Thus, when aiming to create viral marketing via strong reactions, the advertiser should pay attention to keeping overall responses positive.

5.4 Theoretical framework

To conclude this research's literature review, this thesis's theoretical framework is presented. The theoretical framework concludes the theories discussed in the previous chapters and combines and connects them into a more compact and focused form that describes the process of how brands can utilize viral video marketing to build brand value. The interviews and the conclusions of this work will be based on this framework.

The theoretical framework (Figure 3) consists of three main topics: viral marketing generally and the content of viral marketing, which form the “upper” section of the figure, and the brand effects of viral marketing, which form the lower part of the figure. Each topic is significant: the general part justifies the benefits of viral marketing and enables understanding of the vital aspects regarding the efficient use of the platform. The second topic helps to understand what type of content provides virality, as well as other effects beyond that. The last topic addresses the main research question and describes how brands can utilize viral video marketing to enhance brand value. Next, each of these parts will be briefly covered.

The first topic of the framework covers viral marketing in general and enlightens why it is an effective marketing method and what kind of benefits it provides. Viral marketing is a marketing method that fits well into the overcrowded and consumer-controlled media environment (Huh et al., 2020; Petrescu et al., 2015). Viral marketing is also very suitable for the social media environment (Quesenberry & Coolsen, 2019). Viral marketing offers multiple benefits, such as cost efficiency, extended reach, and a more positive reception of commercial content. Thus, it provides an intriguing platform for marketers. (Dobele et al., 2007; Eckler & Bolls, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011; Teixeira et al., 2012; Tucker, 2015).

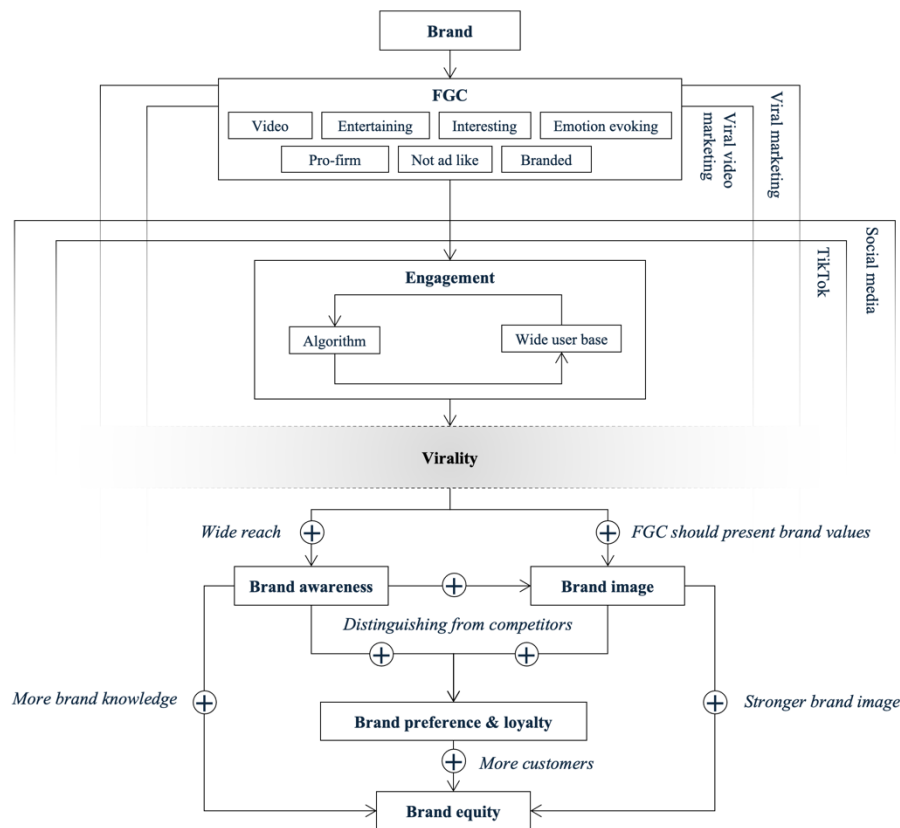


Figure 3 Brand effects of viral video marketing on TikTok

Social media has become the most essential digital environment for implementing viral marketing (Souki et al., 2022), and lately, the discussion has risen, especially around TikTok. TikTok offers multiple aspects that have made it “the go-to” platform for viral video marketing, such as a broad user base and huge popularity combined with short-form video-based content fitting the short-attention-span world and current media landscape well (Wahid et al., 2023). However, possibly the most significant feature is the algorithm-based operating model. Instead of relying on traditional network-based operating mode, TikTok’s algorithm feeds users with never-ending material personalized to each user. (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). This content is not necessarily dependent on the user's connections or network, as the algorithm decides who sees what content. That has made reaching virality and possibly even wider virality easier and faster than ever before (S. C. Chu et al., 2024). Hence, TikTok has become a powerful marketing tool for more and more companies (Wahid et al., 2023; Y. Wang, 2020), and provides an ideal space especially for branding strategies (Ortiz et al., 2023).

While traditionally sharing behavior has been at the core of viral marketing, the algorithm might be changing this: instead of person-to-person sharing, the algorithm can be the mediator launching the virality – thus, this study argues that in TikTok, the engagement has a more significant role over sharing. However, the importance of other forms of engagement has not lowered, and it can be presumed that the same factors affect the engagement behavior as sharing behavior, which makes previous research focusing on sharing still a valid source.

The second topic of the framework describes the content of viral video marketing. Brands need to know what content generates the most engagement on social media to utilize viral marketing effectively (Arica et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2022). The content is the most critical factor determining the success of the virality (Shehu et al., 2016), and it also determines how users' brand assessments are changed (J. Huang et al., 2013; Wendt et al., 2016). This study focused on firm-generated (FGC) marketing content, as this is directly designed, produced, and administered by the company and can thus be most directly influenced.

Viral marketing gives consumers control over whether the ad is worth watching or engaging (Petrescu et al., 2015; Wen et al., 2022). Thus, the importance of content has been highlighted. The content needs to be interesting and emotion-evoking to be viable for virality (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Berger & Schwartz, 2011; Dobeles et al., 2007; J. Huang et al., 2013) and the strength of the emotions enforce virality (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Nelson-Field et al., 2013). Prior research emphasizes that entertaining content provides the most virality sharing (Dobeles et al., 2007; J. K. Hsieh et al., 2012; Phelps et al., 2004; Souki et al., 2022). The same expectation can be transformed to TikTok, as people generally use the platform for entertainment purposes. While the content could include some provocative or even outrageous elements (Porter & Golan (2006), it should be utilized highly cautiously to avoid negative consequences towards the brand (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011; Tellis et al., 2019; Tucker, 2015).

The content should not resemble too closely advertisement, as advertisements are generally frowned upon (J. S. Huang & Zhou, 2016; Nelson-Field et al., 2013), and awareness of persuasion has a negative influence on engagement (J. K. Hsieh et al., 2012; Quesenberry & Coolson, 2019). However, the content must be somehow

recognizable and connected to the brand, or the advertisement and brand value are none (Wendt et al., 2016). Brands should be integral to the content and to the plot so as not to negatively affect sharing (Akpinar & Berger, 2017). However, strong brand familiarity and relationships can also have a positive effect on sharing (Hayes & King, 2014).

The third topic of the framework focuses on brand-related aspects of viral video marketing. The main goal of viral marketing is to affect brands positively (Chinelato et al., 2023), and research shows that viral video marketing is an efficient way to enhance brand-related aspects and improve overall brand engagement amongst consumers (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). When looking at specific brand aspects, viral marketing mainly affects brand awareness, which is often considered as viral marketing's primary objective (Dobele et al., 2005; Malodia et al., 2022; Taino et al., 2021). Viral marketing is also an efficient method to improve brand image by creating positive perceptions in its customers (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). These aspects help brands incorporate good conceptions to their customers and distinguish them from competitors, leading to increased brand preference and loyalty (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021).

Companies can utilize viral marketing as a powerful tool for brand equity building (Dobele et al., 2005; Souki et al., 2022) – Each of the previously described aspects are valuable for a brand, and they all contribute either by themselves, combined, or via both routes to the increased brand equity. Thus, by knowing how to perform successful viral marketing efficiently, brands can utilize it to increase their brand value. Brand equity is one of the most valuable things for a business (Cheng et al., 2019), which makes viral marketing a powerful asset for the company.

6 METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the research methodology used in this thesis to study viral video marketing's effect on companies' brands. First, the chapter will introduce the reader to the literature review and background used in the thesis. Next, the chapter will delve into the data collection methods and go through interview practicalities.

6.1 Research approach

This qualitative study aims to discover, connect, and apply best practices and insights into how viral video marketing on TikTok affects companies' brands. Qualitative research seeks to learn about and understand people's experiences and what those experiences mean in their social lives (Fossey, Harvey, Mcdermott & Davidson, 2002). Qualitative research results explain the meanings of the topics or social environments studied, and these descriptions show how the findings fit into the broader context to accurately reflect the real lives and experiences of the study subjects (Fossey et al., 2002). Qualitative research focuses on understanding a research topic from a humanistic or idealistic perspective, and it is used to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions (Pathak, Jena & Kalra, 2013). Thus, qualitative methodology fits well with the study, which studies brands and their interaction in the social media environment.

A qualitative method was also chosen, as it enables the topic of interest to be thoroughly explored and enables researchers to dig to the core and the essence of the studied phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Qualitative studies ensure that issues are not just explored through one perspective but rather from multiple perspectives, allowing the wide variety of facets of the phenomenon to be studied and understood (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Qualitative study methodology enables researchers to study complex phenomena within their contexts and via various data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Thus, Qualitative methodology is suitable for covering such vast entities as branding and enables correspondents to present points of view that could be numerically impossible to show.

The quantitative approach would provide more robust results, as it is based on numeric methods that can be made objectively (Pathak et al., 2013). However, as the interviews in the next chapter present, brand aspects are challenging to analyze numerically. The qualitative nature allows researchers to collect data on experiences and perceptions, providing layers of understanding that quantitative methods would not be able to do (Peters & Halcomb, 2015), so as brands are such multifaceted entities and much based on human factors, gaining a broader picture is seen more beneficial over numerical approach.

6.2 Literature review

Once the type of research was decided, the literature review was conducted to gain an in-depth background and understanding of the topic. The literature review was conducted semi-systematically. Research was conducted by performing comprehensive searches in multiple databases with multiple keywords and their different combinations. The most significant keywords are listed below:

Viral marketing, viral video marketing, viral advertising, viral video advertising, brand, brand value, brand equity, brand awareness, brand image, brand loyalty, brand preference, brand reputation, brand identity, TikTok

The literature for the review was collected from international online article databases, such as Scopus, Elsevier, and EBSCOhost. The searches were conducted utilizing OulaFinna's search, which combines multiple databases and in each database to ensure that comprehensive results were gained. All the primary searches were limited to peer-reviewed articles, but non-peer-reviewed articles were also studied in the quest for deeper understanding. The use of these articles was mainly to further the author's knowledge and gain perspective – non-peer-reviewed articles were examined with high criticism, and their usage in the study is minimized. However, it should be noted that some of these articles might have been used out of necessity, as the literature on the topic is otherwise dismal.

6.3 Study setting

The chosen companies were semi-randomly selected. Companies were chosen from the pool of potential companies that the author had collected prior to the study as interesting and potential research subjects. All the companies need to all of the following objectives:

1. Are active on TikTok. Each chosen company had to be active on TikTok, but this doesn't exclude the possibility of utilizing similar content on other channels.
2. Have performed short-form video marketing systematically and on a long-term basis. The term viral video marketing is used in the interviews to refer to the kind of social media advertising/content that is the subject of the thesis, irrespective of the practical virality achieved by the videos or their purpose.
3. Have achieved virality. However, virality doesn't refer to the long-term of target-oriented virality, and chosen companies were not necessarily using viral videos consciously: The videos of the companies interviewed may have been successful viral marketing, may have caused virality by accident, or may not have achieved virality despite their objective. Yet to qualify, each studied company had to have at least one viral video and/or be subjectively known in the Finnish TikTok Scene.

The aim was to find companies from different fields and sectors to provide a wide range of points of view and experiences, as they still operate in the same social media environment. The amount of five companies was selected to provide a broad enough but still manageable set of data, where clear emphasis could be placed on the answers of each individual company.

Interviews were chosen as a research method. Interviews are one of the common ways of collecting information for qualitative research, and qualitative research interviews aim to gain access to the interviewees' experiences, feelings, and views of their lives (Fossey et al., 2002). Interviews enable a more in-depth exploration of topics, leading to a more thorough understanding of the subject matter (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Qualitative interviews can be performed in unstructured or semi-structured formats (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Unstructured interviews are often conducted more freely and in a casual conversational manner, where participants can primarily steer the conversation by sharing their own stories and where the researcher's guidance is minimized. Semi-structured interviews are more focused on a certain subject and guided by the researcher with a set of prepared questions, acting as an interview guide. (Fossey et al., 2002).

The study's goal is to gain yet holistic and comprehensive understanding through interviewees' knowledge and experiences, but also from an already specific topic. Thus, semi-structured interviews were chosen as a suitable research method. Semi-structured interviews enable the interviewer to gain a wide range of different views and aspects from the interviewee and expand and enrich knowledge of a particular topic (Junnier, 2024). Semi-structured interviews help explore issues more deeply based on the participants' responses, as both predefined questions and spontaneous follow-ups are allowed (C. Wilson, 2014). Thus, semi-structured interviews can reveal new insights that were not initially expected, enriching the research outcomes (McIntosh & Morse, 2015).

6.4 Data collection

Once the desired companies were selected, interviews were conducted to gather information from the representatives of the companies. Each company was approached with a message, where one or multiple people were asked to participate in the interview, and these people would need to be able to answer questions related to both viral video marketing in general and its effect on the company's brand. In total, five interviews were conducted. In most interviews, only one representative participated and was able to provide all the necessary information, but in one interview, two representatives were present.

Table 1 Information of the interview participants

Name	Business Field	How long have done viral video marketing	Interviewee title	Length of the interview
A	Beverage and Brewing manufacturing	Approx. 2 years	Community Manager	2 h 34 min
B	Auxiliary lights and other lightning equipment retailing	Approx. 3 years	Content Creator	1 h 36 min
C	Private Road management services	Approx. 2-3 years	Head of Marketing	49 min
D	Electronics retailing	Approx. 2 years	Marketing Manager & Inspirational Content Creator	57 min
E	Car detailing services	Approx. 3 years	Entrepreneur	47 min

The interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams. Each interview was recorded and transcribed using the tools within the Teams meeting. The interviews were held in Finnish, and the author translated the answers into English during the thesis process.

Semi-structured interviews are used to facilitate a focused exploration of a specific topic by using an interview guide (Appendix 2), which contains a set of questions designed to guide the interview in a focused yet flexible and conversational manner (Fossey et al., 2002). Thus, also in practice, the interviews were conducted relatively freely and conversationally, but the interviewer led the conversation by asking one question at a time from the questionnaire and letting the interviewee answer it. The goal of this study's interviews was to form an environment where interviewees could

openly share their experiences and results of viral video marketing and its effect on the brand, and often free-form conversation spurred based on questions. The structure of the questionnaire was followed in each interview; however, if the topic had already come up or otherwise comprehensively already covered, single questions could have been skipped. Sometimes, repetition was used on purpose to dig deeper into specific topics.

6.5 Interview themes and questions

A predetermined questionnaire was used as the interview guide to ensure that all the necessary aspects would be covered during the interviews. The questionnaire was delivered to the interviewees in advance so they could prepare for the interview. The questions were divided into three main categories:

1. Viral marketing in general
2. The content of viral video marketing
3. Viral video marketing effects on the brand

The first categories, *Viral marketing in general* and *The content of viral video marketing*, are linked to the two first topics of the theoretical framework and are used to build a comprehensive background image and context to the viral video marketing activities that the company had utilized. These questions enabled interviewees to dig deeper into the topic and thus semi-subconsciously provide answers also to the latter branding questions. These questions are mainly used to answer supporting research questions but are also required in the analysis of the brand effects as contextual information.

The third category, *Viral video marketing effect on the brand*, is linked to the theoretical framework's third topic and aims to discover the most important answers for this study. Interviewees were asked a set of questions about how viral video marketing has affected the brand of their company. The questions included both general questions, but also specific predetermined brand aspects. Mainly these questions will be used to answer the main research questions.

In addition, introduction and concluding questions were presented. Some spontaneous interview-specific questions were also asked, and they were formed during the interview process and conversation. The predetermined questionnaire can be found as an appendix.

6.6 Data Analysis

The data analysis began once the data collection and interviews were finished. Content analysis was used as the primary data analysis technique. Content analysis is a commonly used research technique in qualitative research (H. F. Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis is a technique used to examine messages, whether they are written, spoken, or visual, to generate reliable and consistent interpretations of data, and aims to deliver knowledge, offer fresh perspectives, accurately present facts, and provide practical action guidance (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Content analysis forms a condensed and broad description of the phenomenon, resulting in concepts or categories that describe it (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In a simple form, content analysis is used to classify textual material into more relevant and manageable data sets (Weber, 1990). Within the content analysis, directed content analysis was chosen as an analysis method. The goal of a directed approach is to confirm or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or a theory, and it is suitable to be used if prior theories and research of the phenomenon exist that want to be expanded (H. F. Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. The transcriptions were timecoded direct transcripts of the interview meetings, including questions, answers, and all the additional conversation that took place during the interviews. The transcripts were saved as text documents to be used in the following steps of the data analysis.

The data analysis began by moving data into constantly more organized and simplified bits. First, directly after each interview, the transcription of the interview was used to fill in answers to questionnaire questions. This process included interpreting answers to each question into more easy-to-understand form, adding suitable direct quotes, but also connecting the answers into other suitable questions and topics within the

questionnaire. Once all the interviews were conducted and all the transcriptions were connected to questionnaires, coding and organizing answers from each interview under relevant combined themes and categories began. Themes and categories of coding were already formed for the questionnaire but were refined during the data analysis process. Once the data and answers were coded and combined under relevant categories, the data interpretation and simplification were used to observe bigger-scale phenomena and effects and thus integrate the data into the theoretical framework and answer research questions. The results of the data analysis can be explored in the following chapters.

7 EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION

This chapter examines and discusses the empirical findings of the research. The structure of the examination starts with a general overview of the viral video marketing conducted by the interviewed companies. Following general topics, the examination moves to cover aspects of viral video marketing content. The chapter ends with the brand effects of viral video marketing, which coherently leads the research to the conclusion chapter, where the use of empirical findings is extended and connected to the theoretical framework and prior research.

7.1 Viral video marketing in general

This section is focused on discovering and describing the basics of viral video marketing that the interviewed companies perform. While different execution styles were discovered, the results showed that all the companies found viral marketing to be an efficient form of marketing that offers multiple benefits.

7.1.1 TikTok

The study is focused on viral video marketing on TikTok, so it is beneficial to begin by discovering the importance of the platform to the respondents. All but one of the respondents report TikTok as their significantly most important platform, not just for viral marketing but also for social media marketing overall. Based on these results, data suggests that especially smaller companies have found TikTok a valuable channel, whereas for bigger companies, TikTok is more of a channel among the other. However, research suggest that also bigger companies highlight TikTok as the most important channel for viral video marketing.

Empirical examination highlights multiple benefits of TikTok over other social media platforms. TikTok is described as having a significantly bigger audience and superb organic reach compared to any other social media platform. The algorithm is often highlighted as the reason for the benefits. The algorithm is described as an extremely efficient way to increase awareness, and hence, TikTok offers a significantly better platform for holistic growth and audience reach than traditional social media

platforms. The algorithm is reported to help people find good content much more easily, and it rewards for making good content. Company B describes that with the algorithm, *“it’s almost a mere impossibility that at some point at least one video wouldn’t trend at least mediocre if one just keeps making content.”* Overall, virality is described to be much easier to accomplish on TikTok compared to other social media channels.

All companies are also utilizing other social media channels for viral video marketing. Platforms such as Instagram Reels, Facebook Reels, and YouTube Shorts are mentioned during the interviews, but all the interviewed companies do their viral video marketing with TikTok primarily in mind. Other platforms are mostly used to post the same TikTok videos as cross-platforms, and no companies report to plan viral video marketing content with these platforms in mind. However, the potential of these platforms is acknowledged, but limited resources require prioritizing. While some of the companies regularly utilize YouTube, it is used for other content types than short-form viral videos, which closes it outside the scope of this study.

The interviews highlight that TikTok has traditionally been profiled with a significantly younger audience compared to more traditional social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook. Thus, TikTok is described as an important channel, especially in reaching these younger customers. However, it is also highlighted that the user demographics of TikTok have been and are currently changing, and an increasing number of older audiences are constantly joining the platform.

In summary, all the respondents consider TikTok highly important. They highlight viral marketing aspects and more general marketing benefits. As company A summarizes, *“TikTok is unbeatable as a marketing tool.”*

7.1.2 The definition of viral marketing and virality success

The definition of the virality on TikTok reached a rather unanimous verdict from all the correspondents. In simplified form, virality can be said to be reached once the video views are measured in amounts over 100,000 views, whereas videos with under 100,000 views are not classified as exactly viral. However, all the respondents describe

this as a non-official definition but as something that has been settled in the TikTok scene of Finland.

When asked whether the respondents define their content as viral marketing, the answers are varying. Most interviewees profile their content as viral marketing, whereas some don't directly classify it as viral marketing, at least primarily or mostly. However, all the respondents describe the virality of their content as at least their subsidiary objective due to the platform's built-in potential for it. For example, even if the virality is not the primary goal, also then the aim is to include some virality-increasing elements in the videos, but the content is produced with other factors primarily in mind. Respondents express that while virality might not be their general prime objective, it is always at least subconsciously in mind, especially when creating humorous content. For example, Company B describes, *“Our primary goal is to be visible, but if the content happens to start organically spreading, that's just really good!”*

Empirical examination describes that different levels of virality are set as goals for different types of content. Whereas some respondents even described that their aim is to gain as much virality as possible with all their content, most described that they produce a mix of different kinds of content – even if they generally profile their content as viral marketing. For example, often viral content is accompanied by informational and commercial content, as they might serve a different use, for example, advertising a certain product or service. In these cases, the choice “against virality” is described to be consciously made.

The interview data suggests that all the interviewed companies have successfully reached virality, but the level depends on the company. Most companies even classified that they have reached the level of continuous and long-term virality, whereas others described that they had reached significant virality on multiple videos but didn't yet describe it as constant or long-term virality. For some, virality has always been a goal, whereas for others, it has happened as a natural side process – like the previously described goals of virality. Despite virality being the primary target of TikTok marketing or not, each correspondent highlighted the benefits and possibilities that the virality has provided them.

The number of views the content gets on TikTok is the most commonly used measurement to define the virality of the content. Other statistics, such as reach, engagement, likes, comments, and follower amounts, are also followed. In addition, sharing amounts are followed, but they were seen as a sign of good and interesting content rather than a key for virality. If the content is made with a more direct advertisement approach, the sales and conversion amounts of advertised products are also followed and used to define the success of the content.

While viral marketing is the main topic of this study, it is also important to briefly look beyond it and examine the more general popularity. This falls a bit out of the scope of viral marketing, but the importance of this topic was highlighted multiple times during the interviews, and it will be pointed time to time during the rest of the study. This kind of popularity might not be classified as virality, but it still has a significant role for companies doing marketing on TikTok. While some respondents described that they had not exactly reached virality, they explained that they still had gained a substantial and constantly growing audience for their videos. This audience has been significant to them and has enabled them to grow more long-term popularity on TikTok, which carries over the virality of single videos. While all the videos might not reach virality, they are often exciting to this “base audience” and provide value through other ways.

7.1.3 The difficulty of virality

Theoretically, TikTok offers excellent possibilities and a fertile platform for achieving virality, but the empirical examination proved that this is a challenging task. Results indicate that reaching any kind of virality takes a lot of long and painstaking work, trial and error, and continuous testing – but also plain luck. However, virality is still possible, and despite the presented challenges, all the examined companies have succeeded in the platform. The success can even be at the level that the companies have become the most significant accounts within their sector or even some of the biggest companies on TikTok in Finland. As Company A describes: *“TikTok is not exactly an easy platform, but it’s much easier to reach virality there than on other social media platforms.”*

However, it should be noted that all the interviewed companies have a long history on TikTok (relative to the age of the platform), which has helped them to gain virality. When these firms joined TikTok, it was still relatively uncommon for companies to be there – the presence of the companies was seen as cool, unusual, and brave, which improved the users' reception. Being an early adopter of the platform is described as to help achieving virality, and as a result, companies can earn a sort of status on the field in the eyes of a viewer. However, by today TikTok is reported to have become more usual place for also companies to be in, that the presence of brands there doesn't evoke similar excitement anymore.

7.1.4 Cost-effectiveness of viral video marketing on TikTok

Viral video marketing is unanimously found to be a highly cost-efficient form of marketing. The cost efficiency is described to stem from the achieved results in relation to the required resources and work. For example, at most efficiently, successful viral video marketing on TikTok can be performed by one person from start to finish, and the process of doing one video is described to take rather minutes than hours. However, the previous often seems to be true in smaller companies, whereas in larger companies, the content creation is a result of a more collaborative effort that requires multiple people. Or on the other hand, if the company wants to produce more high-quality content, it might require more time and resources. Overall, the video creation on TikTok is highlighted as a very simple and effective process, but the exact execution methods vary from company to company.

In addition, TikTok is described as having a significantly low financial barrier to starting viral video marketing. Often, TikTok viral video marketing can be simply done with a smartphone without any expensive filming gear. For example, Company A described that the total expenses for starting TikTok were couple dozens of euros for a microphone and a stand for the phone, and Company E said that it had just started doing videos on its smartphone with an app (TikTok) that it either way already had on it. However, TikTok also supports more high-quality content, but it is not described as a requirement – as described more thoroughly in the content section, the content on TikTok can even benefit from a “homespun” style.

While the daily time and workforce required for performing TikTok viral marketing are relatively low, the long-term commitment and “investments” that viral video marketing requires are often highlighted.

7.2 Content of viral video marketing on TikTok

Content is the most important factor affecting its virality. Empirical examination found that companies generally produce multiple types and styles of content with different goals, but a rather collective perception was formed about what kind of content provides the most virality.

7.2.1 Organic vs. paid

Data reveals that organic posting style is found to be by far the best and most popular for viral video marketing. Organic posting style is linked to an easily approachable style that the companies want to be present in the platform – instead of looking and feeling like advertisements, companies describe wanting to blend with the other content within the platform. If the content is pushed to a viewer through paid advertising, the previously described feeling disappears. Paid advertising is acknowledged to provide more views and reach to the content, but this is not considered as true virality; thus, paid advertising does not offer results that are looked after through viral marketing. However, paid advertising can be used to pursue and boost, for example, commercial goals with other types of content, and thus are often part of the marketing toolbox of companies. For instance, Company D describes that it posts entertaining videos with primarily brand-supporting aspects always organically, but videos with commercial aim can also be advertised to boost commercial success.

7.2.2 Technical quality of the content

As already briefly described in the cost efficiency chapter, the empirical examination found that rather low-production and even “homespun” type of content often offer the best results on TikTok, and thus, many voluntarily choose this style. This kind of content is described to fit the content flow of TikTok well, and the “homespun” style

helps to keep the content feel organic, authentic, and easier to approach. This style is described as content, where the viewer doesn't necessarily know whether it comes from business or not. Company B describes that its aim is that "*watching our videos feels like watching a Snapchat or talking in a FaceTime with your friend.*" More high-quality content is often described as feeling much more like an advertisement to a viewer, which decreases virality and organic reach. Company A also describes that their content is "*self-made, the most truthful true and comes straight from the heart*", which represents their brand image better compared to highly finished and produced content. In addition, the light production process is described as keeping the operations and content production more agile and suitable for the rapid nature of the TikTok environment. However, it should be noted that also high-quality content can reach virality and can, on the other hand, present the quality factors that a company wants to associate with its brand.

It is substantial to notice that while the "homespun" content might look rather amateur-like, it doesn't mean that the subject and context of the video's topic would have to be. The people in the videos can still present their knowledge and expertise, but the "home-made" feeling content is easier to approach and offers a more pleasant form of content consumption for the viewer. For example, company B describes how the homemade feeling has enabled them to share their vast expertise in their field and products, but in a way that it seems just like some random person casually talking about the products – this style has helped them to reach high view counts, and possibly even virality.

7.2.3 Length of the content

TikTok is a platform for short-form videos, but the definition of short-form is open to interpretation. When asked, "What is long video length in the TikTok environment?" correspondents described that videos that are between one or two minutes long can already be considered rather long. The optimal length of the videos was discovered to settle at around one minute. Empirical data showed how short attention span is widely linked to TikTok and its users, but this length is considered to keep the video short enough to hold on to the viewer's interest but still enables the conveying of the necessary information and content. However, in practice, the lengths vary depending

on the content type and the general content style: others want to keep a natural and unedited feeling in the videos, and thus, the videos can get a bit longer, whereas others use very fast-paced editing to make the videos as short and dynamic as possible. In addition, changes in the TikTok algorithm can affect the length of videos. For example, previously, the algorithm preferred short videos, but more recently, it has started to prefer videos that are over one minute long, and consequently also, the average length of the viral content has increased.

7.2.4 Subject matter of the content

From a virality perspective, empirical data shows that entertaining and humorous content produces considerably best results. *“Entertaining content suits everybody from toddlers to elders,”* as Company E describes, and TikTok is generally described to be used for primarily entertaining purposes. “Attention-grabbing” and conversation-spurring practices were highlighted, as they hook viewers to the content, encourage engagement, and thus help toward virality. Multiple companies described that they always aim to make content that awakes emotions. For example, Company D describes its approach as follows: *“If our video doesn't provoke any thoughts, we have failed. When a video is good, there are always those who liked it a lot, but also those who hated it a lot.”* Generally, data suggests that some slightly provocative ingredients can often be used, but always in a good spirit to avoid negative effects on the brand. Brand image is generally considered so crucial that while the intentional use of something completely outrageous or controversial is acknowledged to offer great virality potential, it is not found overall beneficial. Trends are popular in TikTok, but not especially significant in viral marketing purposes – once again, the potential is acknowledged, but the utilization is seen as challenging due to trends changing at a tremendous rate. In addition, trends might not fit some companies' TikTok content style or brand image.

As already briefly described, companies often produce a mix of entertaining, informative, and even directly commercial content for TikTok, but the ratios and styles vary, and the different types of content are produced with distinct goals. While other content types than viral videos are not the focus of this study, they are important in understanding the bigger scheme of viral video and TikTok marketing. TikTok is

described as having audiences for multiple types of content, and therefore, content should be thought beyond the virality of one video.

Entertaining videos provide the most virality, but informational videos are also described as a very popular video type. While the informational angle might not be the most viral, it is often precious to the company – and can still gain significant attention and visibility. For example, people on TikTok can be very interested in seeing “behind the scenes” and “how it’s made” types of videos – something that they find exciting and surprising. Company A reasons this by saying, *“Things that are self-evident for me as a brewery worker are not that for many viewers,”* and these kinds of things appeal to people’s natural desire to learn. Another example of well-working informative content comes from Company E, which describes, *“When there is informative content about a common problem, for example, washing the windows of a car, it will always gain great visibility.”* These types of videos provide significant value for the companies – this type of content can be found interesting even by people who otherwise are not the companies’ target group, which offers great possibilities to extend visibility and seed the brand knowledge. Viewers are interested in watching informational content, but it can be helped even further if the content is made into an entertaining form. Entertainment and informativeness don’t have to be exclusive, and generally, these two aspects are somehow combined. For example, Company A describes: *“I wouldn’t differentiate those two aspects so radically – making informative content doesn’t necessarily have to mean that it’s gray and boring”*.

In addition, also third major content type in TikTok content is highlighted in the data, and described as one regular video type on TikTok: commercial videos. Whereas entertaining and informative videos don’t primarily sell products, commercial videos do. It is acknowledged that these videos do not provide the best possible virality or even view counts, but the commercial goal is more significant. These videos directly affect sales, making them an important part of the entity of videos. And there are still ways to maximize the organic visibility of commercial content. For example, Company D described, *“If you can get a good vibe going on to the product video, it is not necessarily a problem that it is promoting a product. It is like the fusion of the creative idea and the product promotion.”* In addition, Company E describes *“People are not very interested if someone just says directly, “Here is this product on sale, buy*

it now." There must be more to the content, but that doesn't mean it could not still advertise and sell the product or service simultaneously."

7.3 Viral video marketing on TikTok and brand aspects

Empirical data discovers that companies can utilize viral marketing on TikTok to enhance multiple aspects of their brands, such as brand awareness, brand image, and brand preference, and thus increase brand loyalty and value. Overall, the importance of branding is highlighted, in addition to the finding that branding is often even considered an asset in viral video marketing on TikTok.

7.3.1 Branded content vs. non-branded

The data shows that the need for branding for the content to provide commercial success is widely acknowledged—thus, companies always aim to associate their content with their brand one way or another. It is seen as vital that a brand's content is recognized as its content. However, too obvious branding is recognized as a diminishing factor in virality and overall content consumption that could cause negative effects and an ad-like feeling. Therefore, branding should not be obvious or have an artificial feeling to it.

In terms of practical implementation, branding is aimed to be made an integral part of the videos – it's something that is not especially highlighted, but neither is it trying to be hidden. Logos are highlighted as the most straightforward and popular element in naturally integrating brands into content, often done by, for example, wearing branded clothes. The content should be done with the content first approach, and only then think about how to integrate the brand into it and how to highlight it in suitable contexts. After all, the viewers primarily consume the video for its content – not its brand affiliation.

The ease of brand integration varies between companies and different fields of business. For example, it is very natural for manufacturing parties to integrate their branding into the content. They quite naturally have their own brand present, no matter if the subject is their products or something else. On the other hand, retailers described

that finding the balance between their brand and the product brand can be challenging. Regarding visual and audible branding elements, for example, intros and outros or brand-specific own music were not found to be effective or popular methods. The aforementioned are thought to strengthen artificial and ad-like feelings, which do not fit TikTok as an environment. However, it is noted that the company's username and profile photos are always visible with the content, which can act as a very subtle part of branding.

The importance of continuity, standardized style, and recognizable elements as branding tools were highlighted throughout the interviews. While the brand might not be significantly or visibly highlighted, the content itself can communicate the brand if the user has learned to recognize it in the long run. Multiple practical examples were presented. Catchphrases, or in other words, recognizable utterances or lines that videos are always started, are described as a simple and effective way to present from whom the video is coming. Recognizable faces are seen as an asset in brand recognizability, and thus, brands have generally clearly formed one person who has become the recognizable face of the brand on TikTok. *“If the face would change in every video, that would decrease our recognizability as a brand”*, as Company C describes. In addition, long-term continuous style choices are reported to become so recognizable that they have become engraved into the brand and are often enough to make content recognizable. Also, recognizable backgrounds and environments are listed as recognizability-increasing factors.

Brand recognition is reported to either lower or increase the likelihood of content consumption. While generally too obvious branding was seen as a popularity-lowering attribute, it is also noted that brand recognition can also act as an improving factor. This is explained by the associations that viewers have regarding the branded content: if the brand has done good content in the past, a recognized brand increases the consumption likelihood, as it can carry a promise of more good content.

7.3.2 Brand awareness

In empirical data, viral video marketing is unanimously reported to have significantly increased brand awareness. Brand awareness is often the most apparent consequence

of viral video marketing, and it is widely listed as the primary goal of viral video marketing. The vast virality of TikTok and the algorithm has enabled companies to expand their brand knowledge significantly wider, easier, and cheaper than any traditional media or other social media channels could have enabled them to. TikTok is reported to provide superb visibility overall, but the importance of viral content was highlighted in its efficiency in making brands known. For example, Company C describes: *“Many people who are not in any of our target audiences and don't have any direct interest toward our services or industry, still know about our company through the content [viral marketing videos] we produce.”* Brand awareness created by viral video marketing is especially highlighted in improving top-of-mind brand knowledge and awareness.

The increased brand awareness is described as something that has been very practically experienced. The increased brand awareness has been experienced, for example, as increased recognition on streets, stores, and other similar locations – as brands, but also on a personal level by the people who have become the faces of the brand. In addition, it is described that just mentioning a company's name often produces wide-reaching recognition – and when the reason is inquired, it is frequently due to viral video marketing on TikTok. Viral video marketing is described as having lifted multiple companies from rather unknown brands to be widely recognized across Finland. For example, Company E has built all of its brand awareness by only utilizing TikTok. Currently, the brand awareness has reached the level, where *“If someone asks on Facebook for car detailing services in my city, there are often people who are from the other side of Finland, and have never used my services, but still recommend me.”*

7.3.3 Brand image (and perceived quality)

Viral video marketing is reported in empirical data as having enabled companies to enforce their chosen brand values and thus also their brand image. By doing content that reflects the desired brand values, companies can associate these feelings with their brand. Viral marketing on TikTok is described as enabling companies to build an especially youthful, trendy, and fun brand image. Viral video marketing on TikTok is used by companies to communicate authenticity, make them feel easy to approach, and break out of stiff corporate images.

Viral marketing on TikTok is also reported to be utilized to affect the perceived quality linked to the brand image. For example, companies reported that professionalism is one value they have been able to associate with their brands through viral marketing. However, it should be noted that this might not be caused purely by the viral videos but rather by the other content that viral videos have brought people to. Nevertheless, it is described that status and brand images achieved by viral video marketing have brought significant trust and credibility for companies, and the perceived quality can also be translated into trust. For example, Company E demonstrates that viral marketing has enabled it to reach a position where people widely trust it with product recommendations and car detailing advice, and high-quality meticulous work has been widely associated with its brand. Company D has utilized viral video marketing to profile itself as a professional and trustworthy partner to do business with and highlights the importance of that: *“When we look at the studies on what influences the consumer's purchase decision the most, by far the most important factor is the price, but the trustworthiness follows right up.”*

7.3.4 Brand preference and brand loyalty

The empirical data suggests that viral video marketing on TikTok also has an increasing effect on brand preference and loyalty. Generally, this increase is described to stem from increased brand awareness and enforced brand image. However, while all the brand aspect results were described as challenging to answer factually and thus being open to interpretation, especially brand preference and loyalty in relation to viral video marketing were described as hard to analyze.

Nevertheless, viral marketing on TikTok was not described to at least have provided any negative consequences regarding brand preference or loyalty. Instead, many encouraging examples were presented. Companies describe that viral video marketing on TikTok can be utilized to make consumers notice, recognize, and choose their products or services amongst all the other options. Company D portrays that brand image work and increased awareness via viral marketing on TikTok together provide a competitive advantage and affect brand preference and loyalty: *“The more we show up on people's screens and evoke positive emotions, the more likely we are to stay in their minds when they are thinking where to shop.”* Companies describe that people

often come to them and say that they like the vibe of the brand and how it does things, and thus, they prefer shopping there. In addition, brand loyalty through viral video marketing can be harnessed as a tool: Company E describes that some customers return as customers, as they want their cars to be visible in the company's videos.

7.3.5 Brand equity

Brand equity is unanimously estimated in data to be raised by the viral video marketing on TikTok. Most of this rise is attributed to significantly increased brand awareness and enforced brand image, but also by increased brand preference and loyalty. Companies demonstrated throughout the interviews how the aforementioned aspects are often connected to each other and thus affect one by one or as a combination to brand equity increasingly. Overall, companies see viral video marketing on TikTok as beneficial for their brands from multiple perspectives. Especially two interviewed companies demonstrate tremendously how viral video marketing has increased their brand equity: Companies C and E reported that practically all of their brand equity has been built from zero by using viral video marketing. Company E described that it hasn't utilized any other marketing channels in any meaningful way, and thus, all the business success can be credited to viral video and TikTok marketing.

No negative effects of viral marketing are reported, but despite receiving only positive results, the brand equity risks related to negative virality are generally recognized. Companies describe that they have deliberately avoided taking significant risks, for example, by creating outrageous content, to avoid negative virality as its risks are known. For example, when discussing the risks of negative virality, Company B recommended that people "*Think before publishing whether this is the kind of material that they can always stand behind.*" Larger companies especially have a lot at stake regarding risks toward brand equity. Therefore, larger companies are described as having a whole team of people to go through the ideas of viral video marketing content to avoid personal lapses of judgment.

8 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter concludes this thesis by discussing the key results discovered during the empirical research, answering the research questions, and justifying the theoretical contribution. In addition, this chapter covers the managerial implications of the findings, followed by limitations and reliability assessment. Finally, this chapter ends with future research suggestions.

8.1 Key results of the research

The primary goal of this thesis was to find how companies operating in the B2C sector can utilize firm-generated viral video marketing in TikTok to enhance brand value. To discover answers to this topic, the research presented one main research question: *“How can companies utilize firm-generated viral video marketing in TikTok to enhance brand value?”* In addition, three assisting questions were presented: *“What are the benefits of viral video marketing on TikTok?”*, *“What kind of content provides the most virality on TikTok?”* and *“How does viral marketing affect brands?”*.

The research began with a thorough literature review introducing the background of the studied subject. The review began by introducing the big scheme of social media marketing, from where the review focused on handling viral marketing and its content and brand aspects. The literature review was used to form a theoretical framework, which was utilized to create the questions for the interviews. After the interviews, the answers were compared against the theoretical framework. The answers supported the theoretical framework and proved it to be adequate.

The research questions are answered next to present and summarize the findings of this study. The answering begins by answering assisting research questions, which help provide a comprehensive and holistic picture of viral video marketing and help the reader understand the factors of *why* and *how* viral marketing produces the results that will be presented as an answer to the main research question. Then, the answers will be followed by a description of this study’s theoretical contribution.

8.1.1 What are the benefits of viral video marketing on TikTok?

Based on prior research and the findings of this study, this study propounds that viral video marketing on TikTok provides practically all the benefits of traditional viral marketing but extends these benefits to the next level and enables easier virality compared to other platforms.

This research highlights how viral marketing on TikTok offers a unique possibility for reaching vast audiences quickly, easily, and cost-efficiently. Traditional viral marketing benefits include fast and extended reach (Reichstein & Bruschi, 2019), but TikTok's algorithm-based operating model combined with a vast user base can provide significant efficiency in gaining virality – the algorithm is efficient in spreading the content, and it has a broad audience to spread it to. While viral marketing is traditionally seen as cost-efficient (Dobele et al., 2005; Nelson-Field et al., 2013; Teixeira et al., 2012; Tucker, 2015), the aforementioned efficiency contributes to making viral marketing, especially on TikTok, highly cost-efficient form of marketing. Cost-efficiency is even furthered by the findings that TikTok enables reaching great virality results with the relatively low work amount on a daily basis.

In addition to technical suitability for viral marketing, TikTok offers multiple content-wise benefits. Viral marketing generally provides increased visibility from the ad-clutter and increased user acceptance (Huh et al., 2020; Petrescu et al., 2015; Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011; Wen et al., 2022), and this research found, that TikTok content enables companies to produce content that is well received and consumed by consumers, even if the content is branded. TikTok makes content consumption easy and offers companies a way to be easily approachable and blend into the natural flow of content. Prior research describes that TikTok's short-form video format and entertainment-focused content basis greatly suit current consumption preferences and short attention spans (Wahid et al., 2023).

8.1.2 What kind of content provides the most virality on TikTok?

This study discovered that successful viral content on TikTok follows mostly the same guidelines as traditionally successful viral content. Entertaining and humorous content

provides the most virality on TikTok, as this type of content suits wide audiences and thus enables the algorithm to find a wide target group to distribute content. Entertaining content is also suitable for motivations of why users use TikTok. This finding supports the previous research, in which clearly most virality has been provided by entertaining and humorous content (Dobele et al., 2007; Phelps et al., 2004; Souki et al., 2022).

Content should evoke emotions and include attention-grabbing strategies. This research discovered that for virality, it is essential for content to divide opinions and rouse conversation, as it can increase the interestingness, and thus engagement leading to virality – otherwise, the content can be seen as bland and uninteresting. This insight is supported by previous research, such as Berger & Milkman (2012) and J. Huang et al. (2013). However, this research did not find proof supporting the use of outrageous or overly controversial content, suggested by prior research such as Porter & Golan (2006). While these types of content are acknowledged to increase the possibility of virality, the tradeoffs, for example, towards brand, are seen as too risky in relation to possible virality benefits.

This research discovered that overall, in TikTok and on viral marketing there, organic and natural-looking, low-production content generally succeeds the best. To gain virality, it is crucial that content should not look like an advertisement – this was found true in TikTok, as well as in prior research, such as Nelson-Field et al. (2013) and J. S. Huang & Zhou (2016). Organic-looking content blends with the other content and thus does not resemble an advertisement. The organic-looking content is a new discovery that can be added to the theoretical framework, differing from content aspects of viral marketing in general. However, while clear branding is often linked to resembling an advertisement, this research found that a brand can also act as an asset, improving the reception and the popularity of the content if the brand carries a good reputation with it.

The content should be relatively short but comply with TikTok's algorithm's current preferences at each time. Short content is described to fit the short attention span of the viewers and maintain their interest throughout the video. However, TikTok's current algorithm prefers videos that are over one minute long; thus, the optimal length

should be around one minute. This finding is partially supported by prior research such as Tellis et al. (2019), but the length can be argued to be determined based on the platform.

However, it should be noted that wide-ranging preferences and successful strategies were discovered, and the previously described tactics might not be the only working strategy. The importance of repetition, longevity, trial and error, and continuous learning are highlighted to find ways and methods that work the best for each account and time.

8.1.3 How does viral marketing affect brands?

This study suggests that viral marketing can be used to affect brands at multiple levels of brand aspects, all the way from increasing brand awareness to effectively raising brand equity. This study discovered that brand awareness is the most significant brand aspect that is affected by viral marketing, which is also supported by prior research, such as Puriwat & Tripopsakul (2021). Viral marketing aims to distribute the content as widely as possible, and thus, it is pretty natural that brand awareness increases – if the brand is clearly integrated into and recognizable from the content, which is a vital aspect to consider regarding content creation and planning.

Another brand aspect that is most directly affected by viral marketing is the brand image, and brands can enforce their chosen brand values and positive picture by linking them to the brand image through viral marketing. Positive effects on brand image are also described in prior research by, for example, X. Liu et al. (2017) and Jalilvand & Samiei (2012). This research suggests that the firm-generated content should represent the firm values, and hence, these values should get distributed efficiently to the vast group of viewers through the extensive distribution of viral marketing. Brand image is often comparable to the perceived quality and trust that are related to the brands, and thus, these factors can also be improved via viral marketing.

Beyond brand awareness and brand image, this research argues that viral marketing can also lead to increased brand preference and loyalty. Similar effects are suggested also by Puriwat & Tripopsakul (2021). Brands can enforce values such as recognition,

trust, or trendiness through viral marketing, and these values can increase consumers' willingness to prefer the brand's products. However, As the theoretical framework describes, these effects flow through brand awareness and brand image building.

All the aforementioned aspects contribute to increasing brand equity, and thus, viral marketing affects overall brand value. However, for these effects to come true, the brand must be clearly integrated into and recognizable from the content. If the values communicated through the content are not associated with the brand, the utility of viral marketing is wasted. This aspect, like all the aforementioned aspects, is supported by previous research, such as Dobele et al. (2007) and Souki et al. (2022).

Also, the risks of viral marketing on brands should be noted at this time. While successful viral marketing has been proven to provide multiple benefits for brands, viral marketing can also have negative consequences. Negative virality is often more viral than positive virality—if the company ends up in a spiral of negative virality, the damage done to the brand can be difficult to repair.

8.1.4 How can companies utilize firm-generated viral video marketing in TikTok to enhance brand value?

This research claims that companies can utilize firm-generated viral video marketing in TikTok to enhance brand value by producing content that maximizes both virality and the linking of desired values to the brand, leading to an increase in brand aspects and brand equity. To efficiently increase a brand's value through viral video marketing on TikTok, companies should understand the platform's benefits, content factors that affect virality, and the path leading from content to brand equity.

TikTok offers an exceptionally efficient platform for viral marketing due to its vast user base and algorithm-based operating model, and it is described as the easiest place to reach virality. To make use of TikTok's potential, companies need to create content that is both virally successful and also provides commercial benefits to the company. Therefore, it is crucial that companies find a way to include the brand into the content in an organic way, without it resembling an advertisement. Virality can happen if the

viewers find the content interesting, and this is often most successful by producing entertaining and humorous content with some attention-grabbing elements.

In case of successful virality, this research suggests that the brand value building through viral marketing on TikTok happens by primarily increasing brand awareness and affecting brand image in desired ways via content, which secondarily can lead to increased brand preference and loyalty, further contributing to brand equity in an increasing way. Thus, companies should design content that generates virality to provide maximum brand awareness but also connect good visions and desired values toward the brand to build the wanted brand image.

Briefly beyond the main scope of this study, this study also argues that viral marketing content should be accompanied by other types of content, such as informational and commercial content, to maximize brand value building. While these types of content do not provide maximal virality, they can be precious for brand value building. While viral marketing content can reach broad audiences and thus positively affect brand awareness and brand image, the more profound and long-term brand effects can remain superficial. Informational and commercial content can have smaller audiences than viral content, but then again, the content can be found genuinely interesting by them, thus leading to much bigger engagement and possibly more impactful and long-term brand effects.

8.2 Theoretical contribution

From a theoretical perspective, this study has provided valuable insights into the research of viral marketing on TikTok, its effects on brands, and how companies can utilize it to increase their brand value. This research acts as a valuable opening to the topic of viral marketing on TikTok combined with brand aspects, which has been studied rather limitedly previously.

To provide a solid basis for research, this study presents a robust theoretical background through a comprehensive literature review of viral marketing, its content aspects, and relationships between viral marketing and brands. When the theoretical background was combined with empirical findings, this study's findings regarding

viral marketing on TikTok provided multiple insights that partly supported and partly differed from previous research.

This research supports the previously discovered benefits of viral marketing but shows how TikTok as a platform provides an exceptionally efficient environment for viral marketing to take place, and thus, it is a place for the benefits to multiply even more. This research supported that many previously described successful content factors, such as entertainment, humor, and attention-grabbing, are also important in the TikTok environment. However, this research also suggests new important content factors, such as organic feeling and low production level, unique to TikTok as a platform. Also, other TikTok-specific factors were discovered, such as the relatively short length of the video. This research widely supports the previous research regarding the brand effects of viral marketing and proves that the same effects on brands are present on TikTok as also on other platforms. However, the research suggests that as a superbly efficient platform for viral marketing, TikTok is that also for brand value increasing through viral video marketing.

Viral marketing as a topic is under constant development, primarily due to it taking place in a digital environment and social media, which are also constantly changing and developing. As this research has shown, for example, the increasingly more popular platform TikTok has had multiple effects on the content of viral marketing. This research contributes significantly to the topic of viral marketing on TikTok and brand aspects, which has very limited or even nonexistent previous research. This research provided multiple valuable new findings regarding how brands should operate and perform viral marketing on TikTok in a way that it can be utilized to build brand value.

8.3 Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, this study provides multiple contributions throughout the work – however, three main points shall especially be highlighted. First, managers should utilize viral video marketing on TikTok as a powerful tool to create brand awareness and enforce the values suitable for the brand. Viral marketing can offer a hugely cost-efficient channel to perform marketing, and thus, it should be at least

considered as a tool in every marketing manager's toolbox. Managers should ensure that the produced content follows the values of the brand and communicates the wanted brand image on each video, but also on a long-term basis to further enhance long-term engagement and commitment.

Second, for content that is made with the goal of virality, managers should channel towards creating entertaining and humorous content. However, managers should also consider producing other kinds of content and design a content strategy with different types of content and approaches. While viral marketing content can be very efficient in certain aspects, for example, informational or even commercial content can drive further engagement and even commercial goals more thoroughly. Managers should be aware of different goals and efficiencies of various types of content to find the best combination for their audiences and target groups.

Finally, despite the great possibilities, managers should also be aware of the risks related to viral marketing. Viral marketing can be difficult to perform successfully, as virality is hard to achieve. Hence, managers should not expect automatic soaring popularity but rather commit to long-term virality reaching with a determined mindset. However, even more managers need to weigh the risks related to possible negative virality that virality-seeking content at worst can cause. It can be concluded that the more opinion dividing and conversation spurring the content is, the more likely it is to hit virality, but also the more risks it carries. If the content strategy is based on somewhat controversial content, managers should consider having risk management strategies and emergency action plans in place in case of negative virality.

8.4 Limitations and validity assessment

One of the most obvious limitations of this study is that it is qualitative by nature. As a result, the research does not provide any measurable data but rather generalizations and interpretations that aim to provide answers to how companies could utilize viral marketing to build brand value. While this study was able to form a comprehensive picture of the topic based on five interviews, it can be argued that the findings would be even more thorough if the number of interviewees were higher, and they would present an even more diverse scope of businesses. However, as Fossey et al. (2002)

describe, qualitative studies can include fewer participants, and the sample data quality is more important than the amount. The interviews can be argued to be comprehensive, and thus, the quality requirements to be fulfilled.

Another limitation is linked to the newness of the topic. Focusing on such a specific and fresh topic, the amount of prior research on the studied topic was somewhat limited. If the prior research was found, often its quality was possibly questionable and did not fulfill the standards of this study. Thus, instead of comparing the findings to the exact same topic in previous literature, the theoretical background is compiled from rather bits and pieces of trustworthy and credited sources that always touch a topic more or less but might primarily focus on another topic or aspect. As a result, certain sources and prior findings could be interpreted in multiple ways regarding the topic of this study. However, to limit the effects of this limitation, this study covers a comprehensive set of prior research instead of utilizing just a few main sources.

It should also be noted that especially brand-related aspects of the empirical examination might not be purely based on facts. None of the interviewed companies had conducted a brand study recently, where comprehensive unbiased results of brand effects would have become apparent. While some interviewed companies regularly measured certain brand aspects, no consistent methodologies were found between companies or aspects. Thus, the results that the brands presented in the interviews always present some level of opinion or interpretation of the interviewee and, therefore, should be considered with a pinch of salt. In addition, as this study aimed to form a general image of how viral marketing on TikTok affects brands, thus the focus on specific brand aspects can be argued to stay fairly superficial.

Overall, while being aware of the limitations mentioned above, the validity and reliability of the study can be assumed to be good. This research widely supported the prior findings, and even if discrepancies were discovered, they were justified and showed to mainly link to the new platform on which viral marketing is conducted. All the phases of the research were transparently documented and described during the work, enabling further attempts to replicate the study or its findings in the future.

8.5 Future research suggestions

As previously described, viral marketing on TikTok and its effects on brands have been previously studied rather limitedly. This study only scratches the surface of the topic – the future research avenues include numerous possibilities to refine, expand, and fortify the topic and the findings of this study. For example, each brand aspect could be studied more closely, and especially brand awareness and brand image would offer intriguing and helpful paths for further research regarding viral marketing on TikTok. In addition, quantitative research on the topic of this research could provide valuable value to the topic by providing measurable results and data.

Overall, viral marketing as a topic justifies constant research, as it constantly evolves due to changing media environment, content consumption preferences, and technological developments. While viral marketing has been studied increasingly over the years, the topic can benefit highly from constant up-to-date research. General studies of viral marketing overall as a phenomenon should be updated from time to time to discover more long-term and bigger-picture trends in the topic. The brand aspects of viral marketing could especially use further research, as multiple previous studies have described that more research is required on how viral videos affect the advertiser brand (Tellis et al., 2019).

Further research on viral marketing on specific platforms, such as TikTok, should also be conducted. However, viral marketing platforms constantly develop and change, and thus, researchers shouldn't just focus on one platform. For example, while TikTok is currently soaring in popularity, the ongoing actions against it as a Chinese platform can ban TikTok from Europe and USA (MacMahon, 2024; Shephardson, 2024) – thus practically forcing marketers to transfer to other platforms. Therefore, it's helpful to perform platform-specific studies, but keep in mind that research should also be conducted towards the general format of the platform's content, such as short-form videos in the case of TikTok. For example, it can be expected that if TikTok was banned, the users would likely transfer to another platform, such as Instagram Reels, which is also based on short-form videos.

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Appendix 1 Description of the use of artificial intelligence

1. Which artificial intelligence applications did you utilize during the Master's thesis process? In addition, assess the transparency of each application (what are the background assumptions — e.g. the background information on the company that developed the artificial intelligence and its possible impact on the outcomes achieved with the application — on which the application is based, why it makes certain decisions like it does, etc.)

ChatGPT (ChatGPT 4) and Consensus GPT within ChatGPT were used during the Master's thesis process. Both applications are based on the GPT-4 AI language model developed by OpenAI, which Consensus combines to utilize only academic papers as a source with references to them.

ChatGPT is possibly the most popular AI tool currently on the market and is generally considered a trustworthy source. However, the application's general transparency can be argued to be somewhat limited, and all the provided information should be critically considered. While applications can be asked to provide sources and information on which the provided information is based, the thought processes behind the AI models are not available for inspection.

OpenAI is a company with commercial interests, and thus, it should be considered that the information provided by its AI services and its applications could include some bias serving the company's business motivations.

2. How did you use each application in different sections of the thesis (abstract, introduction, theoretical/conceptual section, methodological section, summary/conclusions)?

Artificial intelligence has been utilized in multiple sections throughout the work. AI has been used, for example, in formatting the research questions, assisting in literature research, and developing interview questions. However, the author conducted all the analysis, synthesizing, conclusions, and summaries to ensure comprehensive and unbiased results, which the author can stand behind. In other words, all the writing and

analysis have been done by the author, and if AI was used, it was only used to format, edit, and improve the text without affecting its content. For example, AI was occasionally used to help format already existing text into more easily understandable formats – however, even in these cases, no AI text was directly used, but it was used rather as a tool to suggest directions to how text could be edited.

3. How did you ensure that the information produced by the artificial intelligence application you used was a) correct (from which other sources and how did you verify the matter presented by the application), and b) sufficiently extensive (how did you look for other perspectives into the answer produced by the artificial intelligence application)?

To ensure the quality of the study, the use of AI has been strictly conducted in a manner that doesn't lower the study's credibility or repeatability. All the research and information collection have been conducted manually by the author. All the research was conducted manually by the author by using the credited databases provided by the University of Oulu, but the AI was occasionally used to provide further research ideas or directions. For example, Consensus GPT was used as a complementary research tool once the manual research was conducted or direction to a new research path was needed. Consensus automatically includes references to scientific papers. If Consensus was used as a research tool, the original paper was always located and studied rather than directly believing the statements of the AI. Overall, no information was referred to or utilized directly that was provided by AI without shifting through to the original and credible source. In other words, this study did not use AI applications as direct sources. In addition, AI has been utilized to enhance the author's general knowledge and context beyond the research articles.

Appendix 2 The questionnaire of the semi-structured interviews

1. VIRAALIVIDEOMARKKINOINTI YLEISESTI

- 1.1. Profiloitteko itse tekemänne sisällön viraalivideoiksi tai viraaliutta tavoittelevaksi sisällöksi?
- 1.2. Vaikka ensisijaisena tavoitteenanne ei olisi tehdä viraalia sisältöä, oletteko TikTokissa tai muissa kanavissa tehdyllä videomarkkinoinnilla saavuttaneet suuria katselumääriä tai muuta viraaliuteen verrastettavaa huomiota?
- 1.3. Miksi aloitte tekemään viraalivideomarkkinointia/videomarkkinointia, joka on saavuttanut viraaliutta?
- 1.4. Miten kauan ja millä alustoilla olette tehneet videomarkkinointia?
- 1.5. Teettekö sisältöä ns. organisesti postaamalla vai maksettuna mainontana?
- 1.6. Julkaisette sisältöä ainakin TikTokissa, mutta mitä muita sosiaalisen median alustoja käytätte?
- 1.7. Onko TikTok teille erityisen merkittävä alusta videoiden julkaisemiseen ja viraaliuden tavoittelemiseen?
- 1.8. Mikä on viraalivideomarkkinointinne tavoite?
- 1.9. Miten mittaatte ja mittaroitte viraalivideoidenne ja viraalivideomarkkinointinne onnistumista?
- 1.10. Miten paljon näkyvyyttä videonne ovat saaneet?
- 1.11. Kuinka suuria investointeja (suuntaa antavasti) tai työpanosta viraalivideomarkkinointi on vaatinut?
- 1.12. Pidättekö viraalivideomarkkinointia kustannustehokkaana?
- 1.13. Viraalimarkkinointiin liittyy olennaisesti yleisön aktivointi pelkkää sisällön kulutusta pidemmälle, esim. kommentointi ja jakaminen, ja interaktiivisuus sekä "engagement" ovat myös merkittäviä tekijöitä nykyajan markkinoinnissa. Millä keinoilla pyritte saamaan käyttäjiä olemaan aktiivisia videoidenne kanssa (käyttäjälähtöisesti)?
- 1.14. Mitkä ovat olleet tehokkaimpia konkreettisia keinoja osallistaa yhteisöä tekemään muutakin kuin vain kuluttamaan videoita?
- 1.15. Millä tavoilla olette aktiivisia yhteisön kanssa (yrityslähtöisesti)?
- 1.16. Oletteko myös itse aktiivisia TikTok-yhteisönne kanssa, esim. kommentoimalla muiden käyttäjien julkaisuja tai vaikkapa hyödyntämällä videoiden Duet-ominaisuutta?
- 1.17. Perinteisesti sisällön jakaminen on ollut merkittävä tekijä viraalimarkkinointia, mutta TikTok kuitenkin eroaa tästä vaatimuksesta olemalla algoritmipohjainen alusta, jossa pelkkien jakojen sijaan algoritmi levittää sisältöä käyttäjältä käyttäjälle. Koetteko jakamisen olevan enää merkittävä mittari?
- 1.18. Tuleeko mieleenne muita huomioita algoritmipohjaisuuden hyödyistä tai haitoista?

2. VIRAALIVIDEOIDEN SISÄLTÖ

- 2.1. Mikälaisista sisältöä teette? Kuvaile vapaasti omin sanoin.
- 2.2. Ovatko videonne yleensä lyhyitä vai pitkiä? Miksi?

- 2.3. Tavoitteletteko videoillanne enemmän ns. ”kotikutoisuutta” vai ammattimaisuutta? Miksi?
 - 2.4. Onko sisältönne tehty viihteellisellä vai informatiivisella kärjellä? Miksi?
 - 2.5. Trendit ovat iso juttu TikTokissa. Oletteko hyödyntäneet trendejä markkinoinnissanne?
 - 2.6. Oletteko hyödyntäneet jotain erityisen ”räväyttävää” tai jopa kyseenalaista sisältöä viraliuden tavoittelussa?
 - 2.7. Teettekö enemmän tuotteitanne/palveluitanne suoraan mainostavaa sisältöä, vai viihdyttävää/hyödyllistä sisältöä, joka jotenkin liippaa tuotteidenne/palveluidenne kohderyhmää?
 - 2.8. Kuinka läheisesti viraalivideomarkkinointinne liittyy myymiinne tuotteisiin tai palveluihin? Esimerkiksi käsittelettekö suoraan niihin liittyviä asioita ja aihealueita, jotain ihan muuta, tai jotain näiden väliltä?
 - 2.9. Oletteko huomanneet, että jokin edellä mainituista tavoista toimii erityisen hyvin tai parhaiten?
 - 2.10. Oletteko huomannut, että esimerkiksi suoraan ja selvästi jotain mainostava sisältö olisi vähemmän kiinnostavaa yleisölle kuin ”piilomarkkinointi”?
 - 2.11. Oletteko huomanneet jotain selkeitä parhaita tai hyviä toimintatapoja, jotka ovat toimineet juuri teille?
 - 2.12. Kuinka vahvasti viraalivideomarkkinointinne rakentuu yhden (tai useamman) tietyn henkilön varaan, jotka kerta toisensa perään esiintyvät videoilla, tavallaan tullen yrityksen ”tunnistettavaksi kasvoiksi”?
3. **BRÄNDIVAIKUTUKSET**
- 3.1. Minkälaisen vastaanoton viraalivideomarkkinointi on saanut kanavissanne?
 - 3.2. Kerro omin sanoin yleistäen, että minkälaisia vaikutuksia viraalivideomarkkinoinnilla on ollut yrityksenne brändiin?
 - 3.3. Miten viraalivideomarkkinointi on vaikuttanut yrityksenne/brändinne tunnettavuuteen ja tunnistettavuuteen (brand awareness)?
 - 3.4. Pelkkä tunnistettavuus on kuitenkin vasta varsin pintapuolista – minkälaisia muita brändiin liittyviä vaikutuksia viraalivideomarkkinoinnilla on ollut?
 - 3.5. Miten kuvailisit, että viraalivideomarkkinointi on vaikuttanut yrityksenne brändimielikuvaan (brand image)?
 - 3.6. Onko viraalivideomarkkinointi vaikuttanut brändinne heijastamaan laatuvaikutelmaan (perceived quality)?
 - 3.7. Onko viraalivideomarkkinointi vaikuttanut asiakkaiden brändivalintaan (brand preference) ja kilpailijoista erottautumiseen? Toisin sanoen, onko viraalivideomarkkinointi tuonut teille kilpailuetua?
 - 3.8. Onko viraalivideomarkkinointi vaikuttanut brändiuskollisuuteen (brand loyalty), eli ovatko asiakkaanne sitoutuneempia tuotteisiinne ja brändiinne viraalivideomarkkinoinnin ansiosta?
 - 3.9. Miten koette, että viraalivideomarkkinointi on vaikuttanut yrityksenne brändipääomaan (brand equity)? Esim. onko brändinne pääoma yleisesti ottaen kohonnut viraalivideomarkkinoinnin myötä?

- 3.10. Voitko antaa käytännön esimerkkejä, että miten viraalivideomarkkinointi on vaikuttanut brändinne koettuun arvoon tai asiakkaiden mielikuviin?
 - 3.11. Onko viraalivideomarkkinointi heijastunut yrityksenne liiketoimintaan muutenkin, esim. rahallisesti?
 - 3.12. Oletteko pyrkineet luomaan brändistänne jotain tietynlaista kuvaa viraalivideomarkkinoinnin avulla? Esim. asiantuntevana, humoristisena tai rentona?
 - 3.13. Onko brändinne vaikuttanut jotenkin videoiden kulutukseen ja viraaliuteen, joko positiivisesti tai negatiivisesti? Esim. ”uu tämä on tämän brändin video, katsompas sen mielelläni”, tai ”äh tää on tän brändin video, tätä mä en ainakaan halua katsoa”?
 - 3.14. Oletteko huomannut eroa, että selvästi brändätty sisältö menestyy eri tavalla kuin ”piilotetummin” brändätty?
 - 3.15. Kuinka aktiivisesti tuotte brändiänne esille, vai yritättekö enemmän ns. piilottaa sitä?
 - 3.16. Tuleeko mieleenne muita seikkoja, miten viraalivideomarkkinointi on vaikuttanut yrityksenne brändiin?
 - 3.17. Onko viraalivideomarkkinoinnilla ollut mitään negatiivisia vaikutuksia tai ilmiöitä yrityksellenne tai brändillenne?
 - 3.18. Viraalivideomarkkinointi on vain osa yrityksen kokonaismarkkinointia. Miten integroitte viraalivideomarkkinoinnin osaksi muuta markkinointikokonaisuuttanne?
4. **LOPUKSI**
- 4.1. Onko viraalius ollut helppoa saavuttaa ja koetteko saavuttaneenne sen?
 - 4.2. Kuinka onnistuneena pidätte viraalivideomarkkinointia?
 - 4.3. Pidättekö todennäköisenä, että tulette jatkamaan viraalivideomarkkinointia myös tulevaisuudessa?
 - 4.4. Muita kommentteja tai huomioita aiheeseen liittyen?