

The Viral Effect on Brand Image in Fashion TikTok

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Abstract

Given the substantially decreasing attention span of people and the ever-growing amounts of marketing communications that fashion brands spread out, marketers have been prompted to reconsider the tools for capturing the attention of customers. In this regard, viral marketing (VM) has established itself as an effective and far-reaching instrument for developing and sustaining brand image in social media (SM) context. The purpose of the article is to establish if there is a relationship between viral marketing and a fashion brand's image and whether it is positive or negative in the context of the social media platform TikTok. A novel conceptual model is designed based on existing and specifically adapted constructs to measure the nexuses between the domains of interest. Structural equation modelling (SEM) is applied to evaluate the potential relationships between the observed variables. The findings support the main postulate that viral marketing influences a fashion brand's image in a positive way and in one instance – vice versa. This research builds over studies that have observed the relationship between word-of-mouth (WOM)

and brand image and fills a gap by focusing explicitly on VM.

Keywords: viral marketing, brand image, fashion marketing, TikTok

JEL: D91, M31, M37

1. Introduction

I nterconnectivity in online environments is paving new lifestyles and is forecasted to have a long-lasting impact on businesses and social life. After the evolution witnessed from Web 1.0 to Web 4.0 (Mateus & Dominguez, 2020), a new generation of marketing techniques has emerged, one of which is viral marketing (VM). Its introduction to the world through Hotmail in 1996 marked its beginning. However, it hadn't been until the proliferation of SM through Web 2.0 (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008) that VM started to gain popularity and evolve. Using word-of-mouth (WOM) as a foundation, VM has been in the spotlight of research within the fashion industry ever since its birth. The repercussions, however, suggest that VM has never reached a state of complete and unanimous definition. Rather, it has been looked from the perspective of WOM only. Nevertheless, the relatively unstructured usage of VM techniques come (partly) from the lack of a unanimous definition. VM uses social media which is known for its facilitation

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of a “two-way communication” as a medium. In fact, the social media that is an “incubator” for VM and is used in this study is known as TikTok. As the years have gone by, there are examples of VM campaigns that have reached a new peak of success all thanks to multiple environmental factors and the participation of marketers in “value co-creation” (especially important given the lifted expectations of fashion buyers for differentiation). In this respect, like most modern day marketing techniques, VM has an impact over brand image which is often related to the message content. In particular, the focus of extant research in the field is mainly on the message and its components. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to not only to provide a comprehensive and well-structured review of literature in the field, but also to establish whether there is a relationship between VM and brand image, its direction and type between the studied variables. The limitations are the lack of any geographical boundaries chosen, the industry being only the fashion one (and fashion marketing in particular), and social media focus being only on TikTok, as well as the choice of specific VM video and a mass market brand being Nike and the sample size which is smaller than usual. The results of this research further build on previous knowledge gathered on the subject whilst positioning it in the context of the fashion marketing.

2. Conceptual underpinnings of viral marketing and brand image in SM context

The reasons for which VM has emerged lie in the fact that consumers have grown immune to many advertising techniques and have turned their trust towards the people that surround them such as their friends (Kostić

et.al, 2015). Since its existence, VM has gone through a multitude of classifications and names such as: Buzz marketing, Stealth marketing, (electronic) referral marketing (ERM), Word-of-mouth (marketing), E-WOM (marketing), Internet WOM, Viral advertising, Network marketing, and Interactive marketing (Goldenberg, Libai, & Muller, 2001; De Bruyn & Lilien, 2004; Cruz & Fill, 2008; Chen & Lee, 2014; Kostić et al., 2015).

Due to the lack of a unanimous opinion on the characterisation of VM, the following definition is used: VM is a marketing technique (Wolter, et al., 2016) that creates opportunities to build strong relationships with consumers and exert influence on purchase intentions (Rabidas, 2018) by employing the use of SM to enhance aspects of its brand (Roy & Chattopadhyay, 2010); (Wolter, et al., 2016). The typology for VM that is of interest for this study is the one made by Cruz & Fill (2008), who break down the term into two categories named Random Virals and Placed Virals (stated at a later point in the article).

Another important clarification is that this study focuses on fashion marketing. Fashion marketing is considered to be an element of importance for the fashion industry since it can be seen on every level of it. TikTok is part of the digital marketing which is part of fashion marketing (Purwar, 2019). With regards to the fashion industry and marketing, semiotics plays an important role in terms of the human condition by unearthing the meaning of the signs. Semiotics in clothing, specifically - conveys persona (identity, gender, status, persona and etc.) and regulates social interaction (Danesi, 2018). Personality traits also motivate the dissemination of a message (Kobia, 2014) and VM consumers create value for fashion products and the industry due to their power of influence over family, friends

Table 1. Key factors for VM campaigns (Adapted from Dobeles, Lindgreen, Beverland, Vanhamme, & van Wijk (2007), Woerndl, Papagiannidis, Bourlakis, & Li (2008), Rakic and Rakic (2014), Kostić et al. (2015) and Wolter et al. (2016))

Diffusion characteristics	Exponential; Speed; Choice of first “carriers”/well-targeted; Audience reach; Market proximity analysis.
Peer-to-peer information conduit	Channels and technology available and used; Combinations of technologies leveraged; Source credibility; Social profile gathering.
Message content	Imagination; Fun and intrigue; Ease of use; Engaging; Culturally appropriate; Real-time keyword density analysis.
Product/Service characteristics	Sustainability; Uniqueness.
Overall campaign structure	Encourage viral activity.
Psychological propositions	Information sharing as a social norm; Seeding strategy; Self-esteem booster by sharing of ad; Evoke strong emotions; Involvement and participation.

etc. (Rabidas, 2018). The authors believe that the influence of the people that surround consumers in combination with the expression of identity, status and so forth, creates a unique list of dimensions that the consumer must consciously process in their mind. This coagulates around the determinants of positive reception of VM campaigns. The prerequisites to the success of VM campaigns can be observed below:

The reason why branding plays an important part in VM (and the campaigns connected to it) is due to its presence in the message of the campaign - the turning point of whether virality occurs or not. A brand in itself is a complex unit that contains a plethora of constructs. The one that is needed and called upon in this study is regarding the element of brand knowledge (Keller, 2012). Therefore, this is one of the reasons why the brand Nike was chosen. Nike is a clothing apparel brand that specialises in many fashion sectors. Most importantly, it is a mass market brand whose popularity is known and seen in every household in almost every part of the world (Suzuki & Kanno, 2022). That is why this study infers that brand awareness is already built by

the brand and the latter consequently has the power to influence brand image.

The term brand image has witnessed multiple definitions (incl. comparisons made between brand image, brand personality, and brand equity). One study (Kim, 2000) goes as far as to equate brand image with brand equity and brand personality. Nevertheless, brand image is rather a driver than equal to brand equity (Išoraitė, 2018; Benny & Cherian, 2020) to which the authors agree. Due to the multiple definitions present regarding brand image, the authors have accepted the following: brand image is “the sum of a customer’s perceptions about a brand generated by the interaction of the cognitive, affective, and evaluative processes in a customer’s mind” (Lee, James & Kim, 2014) with the inclusion of the sensory processes. To support this, Hultén (2011) alludes that the sensory, emotional and cognitive processes share a link with neuromarketing. Regarding neuromarketing and brand image, Jukić (2019) states that consumers purchase brands which are in congruence with their self-image. On the topic of neuroscience, Jukić (2019) also states that brand image can be a picture,

image, or complex experience. However, due to the relatedness of emotions in this process, the brand image is generated in neural models which are understood as “somatosensory, unconscious images”. This leads the authors to conclude that even though brand image is a combination of four processes (cognitive, affective, evaluative, and sensory), there is a notion of mystery as to what is the actual process that is executed in customers’ psyche. The first half of this mystery can be explained through the existence of a set of unconscious processes that happen in the mind as Jukić (2019) suggests. The other half stems from the premise that there are no two consumers that have the exact self-concept. According to Kim (2000), acquiring specific products or brands is connected with the self-expression and identification through the object of purchase. The same study also goes on to express the fact that the choice of brands consumers make define their images for themselves and for others as it was also stated in the VM paragraph of the review. Furthermore, Biel & Aaker (2013) state that

consumers are constantly searching for new ways to define themselves (one of which is through brands). From this perspective, the authors believe that there is a unique combination making each person different from others.

The literature on the typology of brand image (as it plays an important part in the conceptual framework of the study later on) is complex due to the existence of a handful of streams that become initial influencers of many diversifications made to them. Out of the four main typology streams of brand image (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986; Aaker and Biel, 1993; Keller, 1993, and Kotler, 2000), the one that is of importance here is:

In the fashion industry, one of the most valuable assets are brands (Byoungho & Cedrola, 2017). With regards to its typology, the study of (Byoungho & Cedrola, 2017) provide the following:

Further background on the typology (Jin and Cedrola, 2017):

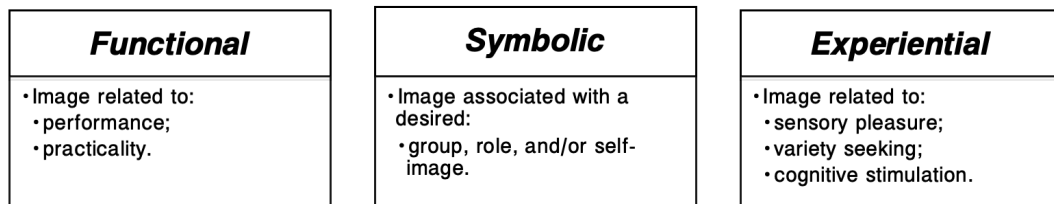


Figure 1. Types of brand image according to Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis (1986)

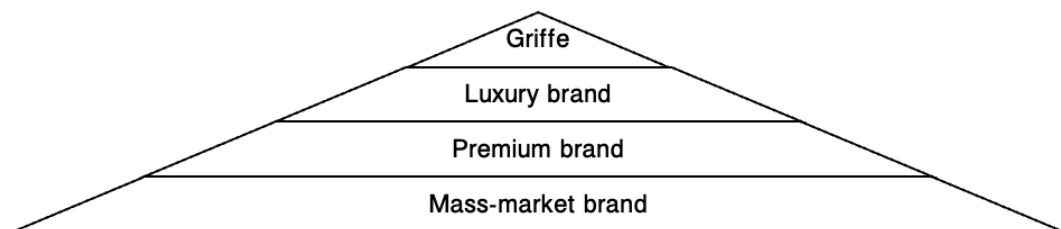


Figure 2. Typology of fashion brands, taken from Jin and Cedrola (2017)

- Griffe /designer brand – items made by hand, unique, irreproducible, and eternal; a good example is Yves Saint Laurent;
- Luxury brand – originates from either designer brands (Dior) or craftsmanship (Gucci) with essential elements being craft, uniqueness, exclusivity, artistic talent, ancestral heritage, personal and cultural history, and geographical roots;
- Premium brand/luxury/new luxe – have elements from both luxury and mass market brands, i.e. provide an alternative to luxury for a better value and has three sub-categories: accessible superpremium products (Emporio Armani), old luxury brand extensions (Valentino), and masstige goods (Victoria Secret) (Silverstein and Fiske, 2003); essential elements are prestige, differentiation, and reasonable premium price;
- Mass-market brands – caters for a wide range of customers by producing ready-to-wear fashion; essential elements are low selling price, acceptable quality, catch on trends fast; a good modern day example can be H&M or Zara with a few distinctions though.

With regards to the connection between VM and brand image, Moore (2003) labels VM as one of three “phenomena of branding”. To gain a more complete picture on the connection there is another factor that must be taken into account – SM communication in fashion. In this industry’s marketing, one of the most valuable assets of a firm is its brand (Ostilio, et al., 2017). Another important variable in fashion is that of gender. Cho (2012) discovers that female consumers search more for information about fashion brands than males which in turn positively influences brand image. However, SM which acts as a VM medium of communication in

fashion is crucial. Moreover, SM facilitates a “two-way communication” and is thus, more effective than traditional communications (Kostić et. al., 2015; Sahni & Appiah, 2019). SM also empowers the creation of user-generated content (UGC) [(Khan & Vong, 2014); (Almeida, Costa, Coelho, & Scalco, 2016)]. UGC creates value that is regarded as value creation and value co-creation. Yet, the difference between them must be observed. The former creates “value-in-use” by customers when using products/services and the latter bases itself on the interaction between businesses and customers (Sahni & Appiah, 2019). In fashion, there is a connection observed with the terms change (Kobia, 2014) and trends (Wolny & Mueller, 2013). Movements that according to Wolny and Mueller (2013), obey a diffusion curve and yet they are flexible enough to adapt through their life to users’ norms, values and preferences. Nevertheless, the most important part stated by this source is that they can be co-created by consumers. This alludes to the value creation and co-creation mentioned earlier. The authors believe that it is possible for trends to be influenced by consumers. The biggest reason for this is the myriad of UGC created on a daily basis. Another prime characteristic of fashion is that it is classified as high involvement, i.e. products are either expensive, rarely bought, linked to personal identity, or carry high risks (Wolny & Mueller, 2013). Translated into the context of VM, brand image and SM, this suggests that message content is a key cornerstone for the success of any VM campaign. Another supportive argument is the one made by Kobia (2014), who underlines that fashion consumers will share the viral message only if “the content matches with their cues”.

To conclude, VM employs the use of a medium - SM. Social media puts high significance on the message it transfers especially in fashion marketing where fashion and brand involvement are central. The message that is transferred in a VM campaign is a branded one and as such can influence the way a brand is perceived in the consumer mind and thus influences brand image. The answer to the question of whether this influence is a positive or a negative one lies in the value that is co-created both along the way of the message and through the message itself. The conceptual framework provided next sheds further light on the form of this value.

3. Conceptual Framework of VM, Model and Hypotheses Design

Previous research in the area of the current study are those pointed out by Esmaeilpour & Aram (2016), which state that the first mention of the connection between VM and brand is in 2003 by Moore who is then followed by Wu & Wang (2011), and then by O'Reilly & Marx (2011). Out of them, Moore (2003) is the one to look at VM specifically making him part of the few studies that have provided information on the exact same topic. In the case of Moore

(2003), however, the attitude of a brand is put under the microscope rather than brand image. Another study that has come close to the current topic of research is that of Rageh Ismail & Spinelli (2012), where it is found that rather than VM having an effect on the brand image, it is the other way round. Abubakar, Ilkan, & Sahin (2016) find that eWOM has a significant and positive impact on brand image and thus further serves as evidence that there is a high possibility for a connection between VM and brand image. The model for this study consists of three tiers. The first two represent VM and the last – brand image. The foundation of the conceptual model is formed through the collection of elements in similar studies made by the following authors:

The model examines the relationships between message strength, referral, and brand image. VM is represented by the message strength and the referral elements. The element of message strength includes the sub-elements of message content and message source credibility. What sets this new research model from the former ones is the addition of the factors that make up a successful VM campaign (Table 1). Parts of these key factors are either already represented in the model or are considered

Table 2. Foundation elements of the conceptual framework (model)

Authors	Name of element taken	Used as part of
Palka, Pousttchi, & Wiedemann (2009)	Intention to forward	VM and brand image variable
Cho, Huh, & Faber (2014)	Sender and advertiser trust	VM variable
Trivedi (2017)	Entertaining, informative, and credible VM message	VM variable
Gökerik, Gürbüz, Erkan, Mogaji, & Sap (2018)	Information quality, Information credibility, Needs of information, Attitude towards information, and Brand image (functional and symbolic)	VM and brand image variable
Tellis, MacInnis, Tirunillai, & Zhang (2019)	Plot characteristics and emotions of a message	VM variable

to be out of the practitioner's control and thus, are disregarded. However, the factors that are taken into account are: uniqueness, engagement/involvement and participation, and strong emotions. Furthermore, there are two types of VM as stated earlier: Random Virals and Placed Virals (Cruz & Fill, 2008). Hence, due to the fact that VM has the potential to occur randomly, the aim of this model is to isolate only these conditions under which the end-goal is a guaranteed Placed Viral which is possible only if the message has considerable strength. Therefore, the adding of a Placed Viral is a new development of this current model as compared to the previous ones.

H1: *Message strength is positively related to referral.*

The referral element comes from the study of Palka, Pousttchi, & Wiedemann (2009) (with a few exceptions) and includes in itself the sub-elements of social conditions, attitudinal conditions, personal conditions, and resource-based conditions. The sub-element that is not from previous models is the "self-esteem booster by sharing" element from the psychological proposition which is part of the key elements for a successful VM campaign.

H2a: *Referral is positively related to the functional type of brand image.*

H2b: *Referral is positively related to the symbolic type of brand image.*

H2c: *Referral is positively related to the experiential type of brand image.*

The last main element is brand image. As stated earlier, the functional and symbolic brand images are adapted. However, the real reason behind such a decision is that the initial definition recognised in the literature review assumes that the cognitive, affective and evaluative processes are simply perspectives of one thing – the brand image and should not be divided (Lee, James, & Kim, 2014). The same source states that "the image consumers have is the outcome that went through a combination of a cognitive, affective, and evaluative process". In other terms, image is a combination of numbers to a lock and each number represents one of the following processes: cognitive, affective, evaluative, and sensory (as it is part of the adopted definition of brand image). However, for straightforwardness reasons, the study employs the use of the typology of Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis (1986) and at the same

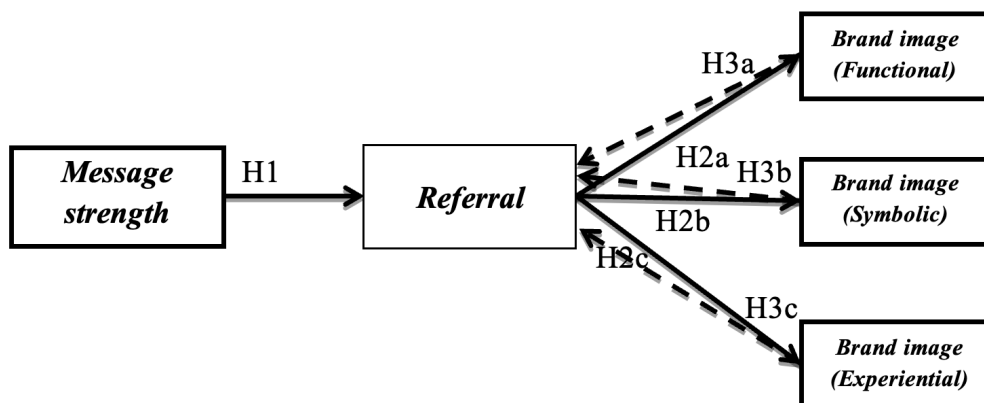


Figure 3. Conceptual framework (model)

time builds over the study of Gökerik et al. (2018) by introducing the experiential element.

H3a: The functional type of brand image is positively related to referral.

H3b: The symbolic type of brand image is positively related to referral.

H3c: The experiential type of brand image is positively related to referral.

What follows is a table that represents a more detailed version of the model, the

hypotheses linked to it, and the respective sub-elements of the main ones:

To summarise, the model that is put forward in this research provides an examination path for the relationship between VM (represented by message strength and referral elements) and brand image in the marketing of fashion. The model is a combination of five different conceptual models that have been cited and as such, the authors believe that it is an accurate representation of the variables governing the relationship between the two

Table 3. Variables, their sub-variables and hypotheses of the research model

Variable and hypothesis	Conceptual definition of variable	Sub-variable	Conceptual definition of sub-variable
Message strength H1: Message strength is positively related to referral.	The extent of influence of the message.	Message source credibility	The sender and brand/advertiser trust of the message.
		Message content	The uniqueness, entertainment, and informative aspect of a message as well as its ability to evoke strong emotions and the need to react to the content (in the form of a like, share, or comment) in the sense of a fashion and brand involvement.
Referral H2: Referral is positively related to the functional (a), symbolic (b), and experiential (c) types of brand image.	The act of sharing information by a consumer taking into account the different types of conditions that have an effect over the referral that are also named as intervening externalities (Palka <i>et al.</i> , 2009).	Social conditions	The conditions related to the change in the adherence in the recipient's interests, tie strength, and expressiveness (forwarding).
		Attitudinal conditions	The conditions related to the change in the perceived enjoyment (forwarding), and attitude towards forwarding.
		Personal conditions	The conditions related to the boost of self-esteem by sharing the message.
		Resource-based conditions	The conditions related to the change in the perceived cost (time).
Brand image H3: Functional (a), Symbolic (b), and Experiential (c) types of brand image are positively related to referral.	The sum of a customer's perceptions about a brand generated by the interaction of the cognitive, affective, and evaluative processes in a customer's mind" with the inclusion of the sensory processes.	Functional brand image	The image related to its performance and practicality (Park <i>et al.</i> , 1986).
		Symbolic brand image	The image associated with self-image (Park <i>et al.</i> , 1986) and emotions connected to the brand.
		Experiential brand image	The image related to sensory experience and cognitive stimulation (Park <i>et al.</i> , 1986).

main constructs. Also, this research fills a gap in existing literature by adding key factors of a successful VM campaign to the research model in order to isolate situations in which the virality that occurs is a placed one.

The causal element of the study enables the researcher to identify the aim of the research through the use of a combination between a questionnaire and an experiment. The experiment consists of a set of questions regarding the image of the brand presented to the participants prior to the video material they watch as part of the questionnaire and at the end of the survey in order to test for image change. For the purposes of this research, the authors have chosen the platform of TikTok. TikTok also known as Doyuin (cited in Meiselwitz, 2019 and Wang, 2019) was launched in September 2016 and has more than 800 million active users worldwide per month as stated in most recent studies (Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, & López-García, 2022) (Xu, et al., 2021).

In this current study TikTok is labelled as a viral marketing incubator for branded messages. The reasons behind this argument are presented below:

This study uses a multi-item approach in the survey design. The questionnaire is divided into three sections: brand image prior to the experiment, VM and its effect on image after the experiment, and demographic information. It starts with questions regarding the current image of a brand, continues with a small-scale experiment, followed by questions regarding the VM aspect of the video and its possible effect on the fashion brand image, and ends with a set of questions regarding the demographics. The table below provides all the constructs and items for this study:

The use of a Likert scale was adopted for all questions with the exception of the ones regarding the demographic information. Regarding the five-point Likert scale, the authors adopt the interpretation of Liqian (2018). The data is collected by a self-administered Lime survey in May 2020. Potential respondents are recognised as those who have experience with SM and are both familiar and unfamiliar with the concept of sharing messages and videos on TikTok (facilitated through their spread in other SM platforms). The sampling technique used is snowball. The limitation of this study is not

Table 4. Reasons why TikTok is a VM incubator for branded content

Highly connected to the characteristics of VM	(1) simplicity of interface; (2) huge traffic (Gong, 2019)/great coverage; (4) covert advertising (Gong, 2019); (5) highly targeted (Gong, 2019)/great coverage; (6) high speed of message spread due to app functionality; (7) voluntary forwarding of message.
Encompasses all aspects of the image of a brand	(1) cognitive - the comment section; (2) affective - the heart reaction button; (3) evaluative - the comment section or the act of not watching the video; (4) sensory - the short video format (Gong, 2019).
App characteristics and Web 4.0	(1) traffic distribution based on neighbourhood and attention (Yang, 2019); (2) watch time duration of a video (INSEAD Knowledge, 2019); (3) AI-enabled content (INSEAD Knowledge, 2019) and hence, its connection to web 4.0; (4) search, watch instantly, social functions (Yu, 2019).
UGC and its high involvement in fashion branding	(1) fashion - the most high pursued topics and generates more videos on that topic in general (Yu, 2019); (2) the creation of high UGC content predominantly in the app blends with the connection made in the literature review where fashion - a high involvement topic, is influenced in UGC.

Table 5. Constructs and items of the study

Variable	Items
Message strength	MS0: To what extent is this message influential?
Message strength: Source credibility	MSC1: To what extent do you trust messages sent to you from: friends and family (two sub-questions)? MSC2: To what extent do you trust the brand presented in the video?
Message strength: Content	MSC1: To what extent do you find the message to be unique? MSC2: To what extent do you find the message to be entertaining? MSC3: To what extent do you find the message to be informative? MSC4: To what extent does the message evoke strong emotions? MSC5: To what extent do you feel the need to react to the content of the message (like, share, or comment)?
Referral	R0: I want to share this message.
Referral: Social conditions	RSC1: The message coincides with my interests. RSC2: I feel connected to this message. RSC3: By sharing this message, I will express myself.
Referral: Attitudinal conditions	RAC1: It will be entertaining to see the reactions of people by sharing this message. RAC2: I don't mind sharing videos in general.
Referral: Personal conditions	RPC1: I feel more confident after sharing the message.
Referral: Resource-based conditions	RRC1: Watching this message has been a waste of my time.
Brand image	
Brand image: Functional	BIF1: Nike's products are of high quality. BIF2: Nike's products are durable.
Brand image: Symbolic	BIS1: I identify myself with the image of the brand. BIS2: The emotions I attach to the brand are positive.
Brand image: Experiential	BIE1: The product design left a favorable impression on me. BIE2: The colors of the ad made an impression to me. BIE3: The music in the ad made a positive impression to me.

restricted to a particular country given the coverage of TikTok and a variety of cultures involved. With regards to the age groups: 87% of respondents are between the age of 18 and 25. This result solidifies the findings of studies on the topic TikTok as cited in Gong (2019), Omar & Dequan (2020), Yu (2019), that the majority of people who watch videos connected to TikTok fall in a young age group. With regards to SM usage: 97% of respondents use social media on a daily basis.

4. Results and Discussion

The statistical method employed is structural equation modelling (SEM) and the model is tested using the AMOS software. Multiple studies in the field have also opted for this method of analysis (Cheung *et al.*, 2008; Rageh Ismail and Spinelli 2012; Abubakar *et al.*, 2016; Esmaeilpour and Aram, 2016; Trivedi, 2017; Gökerik *et al.*, 2018). The variables present are observed and discrete. After being ran through the software, the model looks as follows:

The following highlights must be made in addition to that information:

- Those coefficients that have a star indicate that their p-value is lower than 0.05 and their critical ratio (CR) is higher than ± 1.96 and are thus statistically significant for the research; The items/measures in brackets indicate the coefficient that pertains to that item in particular;
- Those coefficients that are in italics indicate that they are statistically significant, however, the relationship they portray is not positive but negative and thus the hypothesis is rejected;
- The partially supported hypothesis 3a is labelled as such due to the fact that one of the two variables is not only statistically significant, but also portrays a positive relationship with the variable it is connected to.

The aim of the research is fulfilled through the results above which indicate that there is in fact a relationship between VM and SM and it is a positive one. What is more, with regards to the relationship between brand image and VM there: (1) is a partially positive relationship between the functional brand image and VM, and (2) are partially negative relationships between two brand image types (symbolic and experiential) and VM. The results prove statements made by the authors in the literature review: (1) the relevance of the correct re-formulation of the definitions of both VM and brand image appointed by the authors and (2) VM does carry underlying characteristics of WOM in itself and is part to an extent of eWOM. The authors believe that the limitation established for the choice of a renowned brand such as the one chosen in the video included in the questionnaire has played an important role in the achievement

of such results, i.e. the establishment of brand awareness creates a better opportunity for the relationship between VM and brand image to be studied. When compared to previous studies, these results confirm the need of a re-vision of the definition of brand image and later on the adoption of the typology of Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis (1986). The first conclusion is that brand image does cater for not only the cognitive, affective, and evaluative processes in a customer's mind but also for the sensory processes. This is new since few literatures recognise the sensory element as part of a brand image. The second and last conclusion is that the adopted typology of the brand image has proven to be successful. Therefore, as compared to other research this is one of the few typologies that can be supported with regards to its validity when used in research.

The positive relationship between VM and the functional brand image portrays that the consumer is conscious of the performance and practicality characteristics of a product even when online and the partially supported hypothesis of H3a indicates that the practicality characteristic does influence the consumer to forward the message. With regards to hypothesis H2a, what can be concluded is that referral and thus VM, impacts the elements of performance and practicality and as such, can alter the already established customer opinion of a fashion brand. This statement is true for the other two constructs – symbolic and experiential, of a brand image. However, there are certain specifics. For VM and the symbolic brand image relationship – this is proof that the self-image can be altered which coincides with the statement of Kim (2000). Thus, fashion semiotics and the concept of self, have a combined influence over the symbolic fashion brand image. This statement

Table 7. Secondary findings; Message strength and Referral statistical significance

Variable	Standardised Coefficients	Unstandardised Coefficients	Significant
Message strength:			NO
Referral:			
Social conditions	0.840 (RSC1); 0.708 (RSC2); - (RSC3)	0.582 (RSC1); 0.513 (RSC2); - (RSC3)	Partially
Attitudinal conditions	0.270 (RAC1); - (RAC2)	0.178 (RAC1); - (RAC2)	Partially
Personal conditions	0.538 (RPC1)	0.381 (RPC1)	YES
Resource-based conditions	0.237 (RRC1)	0.139 (RRC1)	YES
*p < 0.05; CR > ±1.96			

proves that as compared to other studies, semiotics is a new facet that must also be considered for the correct analysis of the causal relationship between VM and a fashion brand image. Regarding H3, the results of the symbolic and experiential brand image (both statistically significant and insignificant) deem the relationship observed as negative. Thus, as the independent variables increase (the symbolic and experiential aspect as well as partially the functional aspect of a brand image) the dependent variable tends to decrease (VM). However, these particular results cannot be viewed as conclusive. Regarding the relationship proven between Message strength and Referral – the construct of VM does indeed consist of the aforementioned two constructs. However, the secondary findings portray a slightly different picture with regards to the constructs of the elements of message strength and referral:

The result regarding message strength indicates two things: (1) the key factors of VM taken from Table 1 of the literature review cannot be considered as relevant to that element; therefore, the attempt to isolate the conditions under which a Placed viral is guaranteed to occur by using the aforementioned key factors is unsuccessful; however, the fact that they do not belong

to the message strength construct does not diminish their importance, rather what is new and not seen in previous research is that the key factors must be repositioned and tested yet again and (2) there is discrepancy between previous findings of literature and the present ones. The secondary findings regarding the constructs of the referral element prove that the elements put forward by Palka, Pousttchi, & Wiedemann (2009) more than ten years ago are relevant in present times, especially in the era of Web 4.0. An important note that must be made is that not all elements proposed by Palka, Pousttchi, & Wiedemann (2009) were taken into account by the authors. The reason stems from the fact that not all elements can be considered as relevant for the present times. This, however, does not diminish the following new findings: the elements of personal and resource-based conditions exhibited a strong positive connection to the main element of referral which means that the consumer experiences a boost of self-esteem by sharing the message and the change of conditions related to time. The boost of self-esteem by sharing the message ties with the concept of self. Furthermore, this is novel and proves the statement made by Kim (2000) that the choice of brands consumers make define their images for themselves and in this

situation the image is defined by the boost of self-esteem through the sharing of the message. As stated earlier the brand is in fact tightly weaved in the message of the campaign itself which has been proven to influence VM in H1. The secondary finding regarding the time aspect can be interpreted as part of the risks that consumers take up when watching a video and to be more precise – the one related to the time that a consumer gives up not knowing whether they will find it as rewardingly given up rather than lost. The last two partially significant secondary findings – social and attitudinal conditions (both pertain to the referral variable) portray the fact that of importance to consumers are the change in their interests and tie strength – for the social conditions, and the conditions related to the change in the perceived enjoyment (forwarding) – for the attitudinal condition. The meaning behind the results for the social conditions proves that the connection established between the consumer and the message is of significance making the contents of the message also as significant. The attitudinal conditions results prove the nexus between the feelings of enjoyment and forwarding of a message but disprove the significance of the attitude towards sharing to be of importance. The variables presented in the table below are those regarding the functional and symbolic aspect of brand image

taken from the experiment. The exclusion of the experiential brand image is due to the fact that it is highly dependent on the video presented.

By using the Likert scale interpretation made by Liqian (2018), what can be concluded for each element is written in the table above in brackets. One comment that must be made based on that information presented is that a prevalence of the “agreeable” interpretation is observed. Therefore, albeit the existence of a slight difference, there is an indication that the primary results that confirm the aim of the study must be further researched and analysed.

5. Conclusions

The current study ventures into the question whether a connection exists between the constructs viral marketing and brand image as well as the elements mediating this relationship. The results support the aim and prove that there is a positive relationship between the variables of the viral marketing construct and each of the three elements of brand image – functional, symbolic, and experiential. What is more, there is a reverse positive relationship between the two main constructs (in this case – brand image and VM); however, it concerns the functional type of brand image only. An interesting finding is that there is a potentially negative relationship

Table 8. Experiment results – mean values

Brand Image Variable	Mean (Before/After)
Functional: Performance (Agreeable)	4.15 / 4.00
Functional: Durability (Agreeable)	3.99 / 3.90
Symbolic: Self-image (Neutral)	3.31 / 3.25
Symbolic: Emotions connected to the brand (Agreeable)	3.96 / 3.84

between the rest of brand image and VM. The research implications connected to the study pertain to the conflicting data results from the secondary findings. The first implication pertains to the message strength constructs that have been proven to be statistically insignificant. This result is contrary to the findings made by Trivedi (2017) regarding the uniqueness, entertainment and informative aspect of a message and that of Tellis, MacInnis, Tirunillai, & Zhang (2019) regarding the evocation of strong emotions and the need to react to the content. The second research implication is the results from the experiment that are in conflict to a certain extent with the primary research findings. The reason for that is the decrease that can be observed in the means of the repeated question sets before and after the participant has watched the video regarding the functional and symbolic construct of brand image.

On the managerial side, practitioners must pay close attention to the message of the campaign and whether it can produce a

connection with the consumer in order for VM to occur as well as for it to impact the image of the fashion brand in the consumer's mind. Moreover, managers must also tailor their campaigns not only in the beginning but also as the campaign moves forward through its stages and as UGC is created on the topic of the campaign. Another aspect that managers must be aware of is the time a consumer risks by watching the video (the length of the video is of importance for the sharing factor to occur). The next aspect is the boost of self-esteem through sharing the video. The results from this study prove once again that firms must be aware of the different consumer profiles they cater to and as such must tailor their campaign video so that it fits with the interests of the consumers it is targeted at. Most importantly, practitioners must address crafting the campaign video and the impact it can have on the brand in the consumer's mind. From what has been said thus far, further research must be conducted on the following:

Table 9. Further research recommendations

Viral Marketing	(1) Mobile VM - significance and importance; (2) Services in a VM campaign; (3) Test the message, dynamics, brand and individuals' interaction, and reviews
Brand image	(1) Levels of self from Belk (1988); (2) Difference between products and services
Relationship	(1) Stages of a VM campaign and the influence over brand image; (2) Effect on other VM and branding typologies on the relationship; (3) Existence of a negative relationship between brand image and VM
Model and methodology revision and expansion	(1) Testing key VM campaign factors in a different construct; (2) Different sample size and sampling technique; (3) Perform a structural equation on the model; (4) Changes in model constructs

Primary research findings confirmed the research aim and provided an unexpected finding of a negative relationship with regards to the reverse direction of the relationship between the two main constructs. The secondary finding portrayed an inversed relationship between VM and the image of a

brand. On one hand the referral variable was backed by all of its types (even the partial ones) and thus proved the partial validity of a model created over ten years ago. On the other hand, the message strength variable indicated that it needed a revision from the

ground up and that it did not support any of the previous research.

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