



User-Generated Content and Viral Marketing Effects on Purchase Intention: The Moderating Role of Product Knowledge among Gen Z

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ABSTRACT

In the digital era, social media marketing plays a vital role in shaping consumer behavior, especially among Generation Z, known for high digital literacy and content-driven preferences. This study examines the impact of user-generated content and viral marketing on the purchase intention of the local beauty brand Emina, with product knowledge as a moderating factor. Using an associative, quantitative approach, data were collected from 175 Gen Z consumers in Medan through purposive sampling. Respondents were aged 15–24, active on social media, and past Emina product users. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis revealed that both user-generated content and viral marketing significantly enhance purchase intention. Additionally, product knowledge positively moderates these effects on purchase intention.

INTRODUCTION

In today's hyper-connected world, digital technologies and social media have transformed the way consumers interact with brands, enabling them to access information and peer experiences anytime, anywhere (Zhang & Zhang, 2023). Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are now essential tools for brands, not only for communication but also for fostering community and driving consumer engagement (Lalwani et al., 2021). In Indonesia, where internet penetration has reached 78.19% (APJII, 2023), and Generation Z representing 27.94% of the population (BPS, 2021) emerges as a digitally literate and content-driven consumer group, the role of digital marketing has never been more significant.

The beauty industry in Indonesia, supported by this demographic bonus, shows strong growth potential. Driven by young consumers increasingly aware of personal grooming and skincare (Khalid et al., 2021; Boyd Thomas & Lee Okleshen Peters, 2009), the market recorded nearly 13% annual revenue growth in 2022 (Statista, 2024). Local brands like Emina, designed to resonate with the fun and playful persona of Gen Z (compas.id, 2022), are actively competing with multinational giants. However, despite notable brand awareness 40% usage in 2022 (goodstats.id) recent e-commerce sales show a declining trend, and Emina remains absent from Top Brand indices (TopBrand-Award.com). A preliminary survey further reveals that only 37% of Gen Z consumers in Medan intend to purchase Emina products, signaling a disconnect between marketing efforts and consumer response.

Digital marketing strategies such as user-generated content (UGC) and viral marketing are key to bridging this gap. UGC, which includes consumer-created reviews, photos, and videos, fosters authenticity and trust (Panopoulos et al., 2023). Studies indicate that 81% of consumers consider UGC an important source of information (Park & Lee, 2021). However, the impact of UGC on purchase intention is not uniform; while several studies confirm its positive influence (Sethna et al., 2017; Karunanayake & Madubashini, 2019; Mayrhofer et al., 2020; Israfilzade & Baghirova, 2022), others report insignificant effects (Andarsari & Suryadi, 2024).

Similarly, viral marketing brand-created campaigns designed for rapid online dissemination has demonstrated potential in enhancing consumer engagement and driving purchase behavior (Bin Ismail et al., 2022; Hendijani Fard & Marvi, 2020; Bhowmik & Chowdhury, 2024). Emina's initiatives, such as the Instagram filter campaign for Emina Poppin' Matte, exemplify this strategy (eminacosmetics.com, 2022). Yet, 60% of surveyed consumers did not perceive viral marketing as influencing their purchase decisions, highlighting an area for further investigation. Moreover, prior studies also show mixed results regarding viral marketing's direct impact on purchase intention (Trivedi, 2017).

An additional layer of complexity arises from product knowledge, which shapes how consumers process marketing content (Chen & Deng, 2016; Wang et al., 2019). Consumers with high product knowledge are more critical and discerning (Chiou et al., 2018), while those with lower knowledge may rely more on social cues and marketing messages. Although product knowledge has been

shown to influence purchase intention (Nautiyal & Lal, 2022), findings remain inconsistent (Augusta et al., 2019; Shen & Chen, 2020). Notably, several studies suggest that product knowledge may also moderate the effects of digital marketing on purchase behavior (Chen & Deng, 2016; Sayal & Pant, 2023; Chou et al., 2024), a dynamic yet underexplored aspect in the context of Indonesian local beauty brands.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to examine how UGC and viral marketing influence the purchase intention of Emina's products and to explore the moderating role of product knowledge among Generation Z consumers in Medan. By focusing on this niche demographic within a rapidly evolving and competitive beauty market, the study contributes to the enrichment of theoretical understanding and offers practical insights for local brands navigating the complexities of digital consumer engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Purchase Intentions

Purchase intention, rooted in consumer psychology, reflects the subjective probability that a consumer will engage in a specific purchase behavior. According to Mullet and Karson, as cited in Zong et al. (2023), purchase intention emerges from a consumer's attitudes toward a product or brand, combined with external influences, forming a subjective tendency to choose certain products. This intention serves as a crucial predictor of consumer behavior. In this process, purchase intention is not merely a static thought but evolves through various cognitive and emotional stages, often described through the AIDA model attention, interest, desire, and action (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Furthermore, it encompasses different behavioral dimensions such as transactional, referential, preferential, and explorative interests (Purbohastuti & Hidayah, 2020). Strengthening purchase intention enhances the likelihood of actual buying behavior, bridging the gap between consumer evaluation and decision-making (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Ultimately, purchase intention encapsulates a consumer's willingness and readiness to purchase a product, shaped by attitudes, perceptions, desires, and external stimuli.

Product Knowledge

Product knowledge refers to the comprehensive set of information, meanings, and beliefs that consumers hold about a product, which is stored in their memory and used to make informed purchasing decisions (Peter & Olson, 2010). This knowledge encompasses awareness of product attributes, functional and psychosocial benefits, and values associated with product use that align with personal goals. Consumers with higher product knowledge tend to be more rational and confident in evaluating alternatives, thereby reducing the need for external information (Aertsens et al., 2011; Augusta et al., 2019). It plays a crucial role not only in evaluating products but also in shaping how consumers search for and process information (Shen & Chen, 2020). Product knowledge is typically categorized into subjective knowledge (perceived understanding), objective knowledge (factual information stored in memory), and prior knowledge (past learning experiences) (Chiou et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2019). The depth and

quality of this knowledge significantly influence purchase intention, particularly in high-involvement decisions such as cosmetics, where both functionality and brand trust are considered.

User-Generated Content

User-Generated Content (UGC) refers to digital content voluntarily created and shared by individuals—rather than professionals—through platforms such as social media, video-sharing sites, and blogs. Closely tied to the evolution of Web 2.0, UGC encompasses formats like text, images, and videos, and is valued for its authenticity, openness, and credibility (Balbi et al., 2021; Gupta & Gupta, 2019). Unlike firm-generated content (FGC), UGC reflects genuine consumer experiences and is perceived as more trustworthy, making it influential in shaping attitudes and purchase decisions (Rajamma et al., 2020; Zhuang et al., 2023). Fueled by the interactive nature of digital platforms, UGC has become a key force across marketing, e-commerce, and social domains, acting as a participatory tool that bridges peer communication and brand perception.

Viral Marketing

Viral Marketing is a strategic promotional approach that leverages digital platforms to stimulate rapid, peer-to-peer dissemination of marketing messages, often resembling the organic spread of a virus. Rooted in the use of interactive technologies such as email, blogs, instant messaging, and social media, viral marketing relies on persuasive, emotionally engaging, and shareable content that triggers audience participation and buzz (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011; Hendijani Fard & Marvi, 2020; Mustafa, 2020). Rather than direct transmission from firms, messages are voluntarily spread by consumers, mimicking word-of-mouth effects that can lead to exponential outreach (Liu & Wang, 2019). Effective viral campaigns typically incorporate elements such as free offers, influencer collaborations, and platform optimization to align with consumer identities, social trends, and digital behavior (Rosyad et al., 2024; Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). Key dimensions include the credibility of the messenger, memorability of the message, the suitability of the platform environment, as well as informativeness, entertainment value, emotional irritation, and source trustworthiness (Al-Dwairi & Alawneh, 2024; Tricahyono et al., 2019). Altogether, viral marketing functions as a high-impact, low-cost method to enhance brand visibility and influence consumer behavior, especially within tech-savvy audiences such as millennials and Gen Z.

Based on these considerations, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: User-Generated Content has a positive and significant effect on Purchase Intention.

H2: Viral Marketing has a positive and significant effect on Purchase Intention.

H3: Product Knowledge moderates the relationship between User-Generated Content and Purchase Intention.

H4: Product Knowledge moderates the relationship between Viral Marketing and Purchase Intention.

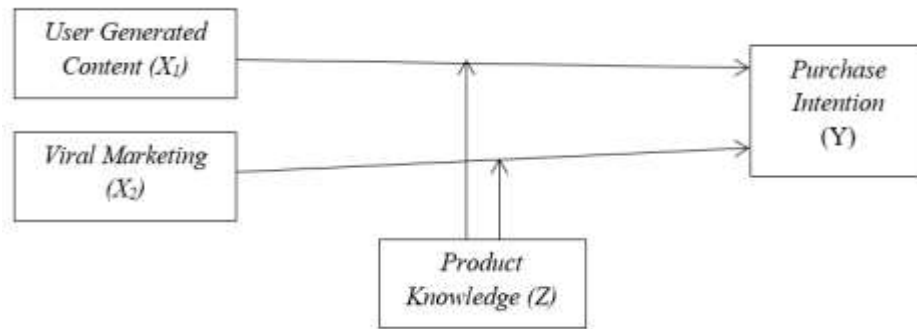


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative approach using an associative method to examine the relationships among multiple variables, namely User-Generated Content (X1), Viral Marketing (X2), Product Knowledge (Z), and Purchase Intention (Y). The research was conducted among Generation Z consumers in Medan who actively use at least one social media platform (Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube) and show interest in Emina beauty products. Data were collected from November 2024 to February 2025 across selected shopping malls in East, West, and Central Medan representative locations frequently visited by Gen Z. A total of 175 respondents were selected through purposive sampling, based on a ratio of five respondents per each of the 35 questionnaire items. All variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale to assess levels of agreement toward structured statements.

Primary data were gathered through questionnaires, while secondary data came from literature and supporting documentation. Instrument validity was tested using SPSS, with all items showing significant correlation ($r > 0.361$, $p < 0.05$), and reliability analysis resulted in a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.975, indicating excellent consistency. The analysis techniques applied include descriptive statistics and path analysis using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), processed via SmartPLS software. PLS-SEM was chosen for its robustness in handling complex, non-normally distributed data and its suitability for predictive modeling in marketing research. Hypothesis testing was conducted using the bootstrapping technique, with a significance threshold of $t > 1.96$ and $p < 0.05$.

RESEARCH RESULT

Charateristic Respondents

The descriptive analysis in this study is based on data collected through questionnaires distributed to 175 respondents aged 15 to 24 years who actively use at least one social media platform and have previously purchased or used Emina cosmetic products. The majority of respondents were female (81.1%), which aligns with the primary target market of Emina young women interested in beauty and skincare. Most respondents were within the 18–21 age group (45.1%), followed by high school students aged 15–17 (33.1%), and those aged 22–24 (21.8%). These age groups reflect the brand's focus on Gen Z consumers who are highly engaged with online beauty content and responsive to digital

marketing trends. The largest portion of respondents were university students (38.3%), indicating that Emina has a strong appeal among those pursuing higher education, while a significant number were still in high school (33.1%).

In terms of socioeconomic and digital behavior, most respondents reported a monthly income or allowance between IDR 500,001 and IDR 1,500,000 (34.9%), indicating that Emina's affordability fits the budget of the average Gen Z consumer in Medan. TikTok emerged as the most commonly used social media platform (64.0%), reinforcing the platform's influence on young users' purchasing behavior. Geographically, respondents were widely spread across various districts in Medan, with the highest concentration from Medan Kota (13.14%), Medan Polonia (10.29%), and Medan Perjuangan (9.71%) areas known for their commercial activity and accessibility to beauty products. User-generated content played a crucial role in influencing purchase intention (35.4%), followed by peer recommendations (28.6%), highlighting a strong preference among Gen Z consumers for authentic, community-driven marketing over traditional advertising.

Measurement Model

This section provides an overview of the measurement model results, including the loading factors, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct in the study. This comprehensive evaluation offers insights into the validity and reliability of the constructs related to, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Measurement Model Results

Variable			CA	CR (rho_a)	CR (rho_c)	AVE
<i>User Generated Content (X₁)</i>	UGC1	0.919	0.953	0.955	0.961	0.754
	UGC2	0.836				
	UGC3	0.874				
	UGC4	0.860				
	UGC5	0.891				
	UGC6	0.874				
	UGC7	0.888				
	UGC8	0.797				
<i>Viral Marketing (X₂)</i>	VM1	0.920	0,967	0.976	0.972	0.793
	VM2	0.874				
	VM3	0.933				
	VM4	0.844				
	VM5	0.890				
	VM6	0.898				
	VM7	0.900				
	VM8	0.868				
<i>Product Knowledge (Z)</i>	PK1	0.951		0.995	0.993	0.930
	PK2	0.969				

	PK3	0.975	0,992			
	PK4	0.980				
	PK5	0.949				
	PK6	0.959				
	PK7	0.958				
	PK8	0.962				
	PK9	0.973				
	PK10	0.966				
<i>Purchase Intention (Y)</i>	PI1	0,789	0,952			
	PI2	0.906				
	PI3	0.946				
	PI4	0.819				
	PI5	0.920				
	PI6	0.808				
	PI7	0.849				
	PI8	0.888			0.957	0.960

Table 1 presents the measurement model results, highlighting four constructs: User Generated Content, Viral Marketing, Product Knowledge, and Purchase Intention. These constructs are assessed through their respective indicators, with the evaluation focusing on loading factors, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE).

The results show that all indicators exhibit loading factors exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.5, aligning with the criteria outlined by Ghozali (2016). He suggests that loading factor values ranging from 0.5 to 0.6 are acceptable for confirming convergent validity. For instance, the *User Generated Content* construct demonstrates loading factors ranging from 0.797 to 0.919, confirming the adequacy of its eight indicators (UGC1 to UGC8). Similarly, *Viral Marketing* has indicator loadings ranging between 0.844 and 0.933 across nine items (VM1 to VM9), while *Product Knowledge* shows exceptionally high loadings from 0.949 to 0.980 for ten indicators (PK1 to PK10). Lastly, *Purchase Intention* comprises eight indicators (PI1 to PI8) with loadings ranging from 0.789 to 0.946, further supporting the construct validity.

Composite reliability (CR) values for all constructs far exceed the recommended threshold of 0.7, indicating high internal consistency. Specifically, *User Generated Content* records a CR of 0.961, *Viral Marketing* reaches 0.972, *Product Knowledge* achieves 0.993, and *Purchase Intention* attains 0.960. These results affirm the reliability of each construct, consistent with the recommendations of Ghozali and Latan (2015).

The average variance extracted (AVE) values for all constructs also exceed the critical value of 0.5, as recommended by Hair et al. (2010), confirming convergent validity. The AVE values are as follows: *User Generated Content* (0.754), *Viral Marketing* (0.793), *Product Knowledge* (0.930), and *Purchase Intention* (0.752). These values indicate that each construct adequately captures the variance of its respective indicators.

In summary, the findings in Table 1 confirm that all constructs meet the necessary criteria for loading factors, composite reliability, and average variance extracted. This validates the robustness and reliability of the measurement model and provides a solid foundation for further structural model analysis.

Steps to Test Your Results Here
Structural Model

The predictive power of the constructs examined in this study is illustrated through the R-square values for Purchase Intentions. These values provide insights into the extent to which the independent variables explain the variance in dependent variable. The R-square values are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. R Square

	R-square	R-square adjusted
PI	0.501	0.486

Table 2 presents the R-Square (R^2) results of the structural model (inner model) evaluation. The R^2 value is used to determine the extent to which exogenous latent variables explain the variance of endogenous latent variables, providing insight into the model's predictive power (Ghozali, 2021). According to the classification by Hamid and Anwar (2019) as well as Hair et al. (2021), R^2 values can be interpreted as follows: 0.75 (strong), 0.50 (moderate), and 0.25 (weak).

As shown in Table 2, the R-Square value for the construct Purchase Intention (PI) is 0.501, with an adjusted R^2 of 0.486. This indicates that 50.1% of the variance in Purchase Intention can be explained by the combined effects of User Generated Content (UGC), Viral Marketing (VM), and Product Knowledge (PK). Consequently, this model falls into the moderate category, suggesting that while the included constructs contribute significantly to explaining Purchase Intention, there remains 49.9% of unexplained variance that may be influenced by other factors outside the scope of this study.

These findings highlight the importance of the three constructs in shaping consumer purchase intentions, while also indicating the potential for further model refinement by incorporating additional relevant variables in future research.

Table 3. Path Coefficients

	<i>Original sample (O)</i>	<i>Sample mean (M)</i>	<i>Standard deviation (STDEV)</i>	<i>T statistics (O/STDEV)</i>	<i>P values</i>	Decision
UGC -> PI	0.374	0.371	0.129	2.903	0.004	Accepted
VM -> PI	0.196	0.197	0.077	2.538	0.011	Accepted
PK x UGC -> PI	0.353	0.348	0.113	3.128	0.002	Accepted
PK x VM -> PI	0.220	0.216	0.079	2.785	0.005	Accepted

Table 3 presents the structural model results, specifically the path coefficients assessing both direct and interaction effects among the variables User Generated Content, Viral Marketing, Product Knowledge, and Purchase Intention. These coefficients provide insight into the magnitude and significance of each relationship within the proposed research framework.

The direct effect of User Generated Content on Purchase Intention is statistically significant, with a path coefficient (β) of 0.374, a t-statistic of 2.903, and a p-value of 0.004. This indicates that content generated by users such as reviews, testimonials, or online discussions positively influences consumers' intention to purchase. In other words, the more actively users contribute content related to a product or service, the more likely potential consumers are to develop the intention to make a purchase.

Similarly, Viral Marketing shows a significant positive effect on Purchase Intention, with a path coefficient of 0.196, a t-statistic of 2.538, and a p-value of 0.011. This result suggests that marketing strategies designed to be rapidly and widely shared among consumers such as engaging videos, shareable campaigns, or digital word-of-mouth play a meaningful role in stimulating purchase intentions.

In terms of interaction effects, the relationship between User Generated Content and Purchase Intention is moderated by Product Knowledge, with a path coefficient of 0.353, a t-statistic of 3.128, and a p-value of 0.002. This finding indicates that higher levels of product knowledge strengthen the positive impact of user-generated content on purchase intention. Consumers who are more informed about a product are more likely to be influenced by content generated by other users.

Likewise, the interaction between Viral Marketing and Product Knowledge also yields a significant result, with a path coefficient of 0.220, a t-statistic of 2.785, and a p-value of 0.005. This suggests that consumers with a better understanding of the product are more responsive to viral marketing efforts, thereby increasing their intention to purchase.

In summary, the findings in Table 5 reinforce the importance of User Generated Content and Viral Marketing as direct predictors of Purchase

Intention. Moreover, Product Knowledge acts as a significant moderating variable, enhancing the influence of both User Generated Content and Viral Marketing on consumers' purchasing decisions. These results underscore the value of combining informative content with engaging marketing strategies to effectively influence consumer behavior.

DISCUSSION

The present study provides empirical support for the positive and significant impact of User-Generated Content (UGC) and Viral Marketing (VM) on Purchase Intention (PI) among Generation Z consumers in Medan, with Product Knowledge (PK) emerging as a critical moderating variable. The findings reinforce the growing relevance of digitally driven marketing mechanisms, particularly within youth-dominated markets like the Indonesian beauty industry.

The study demonstrates a significant and positive influence of UGC on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.374$, $p < 0.01$), aligning with previous research highlighting the role of peer-generated content in shaping consumer attitudes (Sethna et al., 2017; Panopoulos et al., 2023). This effect underscores the credibility and authenticity that Gen Z consumers attribute to content created by their peers, especially in experiential domains such as cosmetics (Zhuang et al., 2023). Given the participatory culture of platforms like TikTok and Instagram, where consumers voluntarily share skincare routines, unboxings, and tutorials, this study affirms that Gen Z values social proof over corporate messaging. The 35.4% of respondents indicating UGC as their primary source of influence further substantiates its persuasive power in the digital purchase journey.

Viral marketing also showed a statistically significant effect on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.196$, $p < 0.05$), although the magnitude was less pronounced than UGC. This result partially supports the theoretical perspective of Kaplan & Haenlein (2011) and recent empirical evidence (Bhowmik & Chowdhury, 2024), which suggest that viral strategies can effectively stimulate engagement and drive behavioral responses. However, the relatively modest coefficient aligns with survey findings indicating that 60% of respondents were unconvinced by Emina's viral marketing efforts. This suggests a disconnect between campaign virality and perceived persuasive quality. Viral content must not only be widespread but also relevant, trustworthy, and aligned with the audience's digital expectations (Al-Dwairi & Alawneh, 2024).

The moderating effects of Product Knowledge were significant for both UGC and viral marketing ($\beta = 0.353$ and $\beta = 0.220$, respectively; both $p < 0.01$), revealing important nuances. First, the interaction between PK and UGC supports the cognitive elaboration theory: consumers with greater product familiarity are more capable of interpreting and validating peer-generated content (Chen & Deng, 2016). Their enhanced evaluative capacity allows them to discern authenticity and derive functional insights from UGC, thereby translating such content into stronger behavioral intent.

Second, the interaction effect between PK and VM suggests that informed consumers respond more favorably to viral messaging, likely because their familiarity with product attributes allows them to contextualize promotional

content within their existing knowledge structures (Wang et al., 2019; Sayal & Pant, 2023). This finding reflects dual-process models of persuasion, where high-involvement consumers engage in central route processing, evaluating message quality rather than being swayed by superficial cues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Collectively, these moderating effects emphasize that consumer sophistication—especially among Gen Z—plays a pivotal role in how digital content is processed. Brands like Emina must therefore tailor digital strategies to address varying levels of product literacy among their target audience. For lower-knowledge consumers, simplified, visually engaging content might be more effective, while more detailed or community-endorsed materials could better serve more knowledgeable segments.

The R^2 value of 0.501 indicates that UGC, VM, and PK collectively account for approximately 50.1% of the variance in purchase intention moderate explanatory power by marketing research standards (Hair et al., 2021). This leaves room for the inclusion of additional variables such as brand trust, perceived quality, or price sensitivity in future studies (Nautiyal & Lal, 2022). Nonetheless, the current model offers meaningful insights into how digital marketing tactics operate synergistically with consumer knowledge structures to influence Gen Z's buying behavior.

Theoretically, this study extends the understanding of digital marketing effectiveness by validating the moderating role of product knowledge in a Southeast Asian context, particularly within a Gen Z consumer base often underrepresented in global marketing literature. It contributes to the literature by demonstrating that while digital engagement mechanisms are essential, their efficacy is partially contingent upon consumer readiness and capacity to interpret such messages.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that User-Generated Content and Viral Marketing significantly influence the purchase intentions of Generation Z consumers in Medan, with Product Knowledge strengthening these effects. The findings highlight the importance of authentic, engaging, and informative digital content in driving consumer behavior. For implementation, brands like Emina should actively encourage consumer participation through UGC campaigns and optimize viral marketing strategies that align with Gen Z's digital habits and values. Additionally, educational content can be used to elevate product knowledge, thereby enhancing marketing effectiveness.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. It focuses solely on Gen Z in Medan and on a single brand, which may limit generalizability. Future research could expand the demographic and geographic scope, include comparative analyses with other brands, or explore additional variables such as brand trust or peer influence. A mixed-method approach may also offer deeper insights into the motivations behind digital engagement and purchase behavior.

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