

Brand Awareness as a Mediator Between Viral Marketing and Customer Satisfaction in Skincare Products Among Gen Z

Nur Latifa Isnaini Putri, Ayu Nareswari, Tri Palupi Robustin

Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Widya Gama Lumajang

Latifaputri77@gmail.com

Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to examine the role of brand awareness in mediating the influence of viral marketing on customer satisfaction for skincare products among Generation Z in Jember. In today's digital era, viral marketing strategies are widely adopted, but their long term effectiveness depends on consumers' trust and awareness toward the brand.

Research Methodology: This research employed a quantitative approach using a survey method. Data were collected through an online questionnaire from 100 Gen Z respondents selected using purposive sampling. The criteria included being skincare users, active on social media, and having been exposed to viral skincare content. The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS SEM) with SmartPLS software.

Results: The results reveal that viral marketing has a significant positive effect on both brand awareness and customer satisfaction. Furthermore, brand awareness significantly affects customer satisfaction and mediates the relationship between viral marketing and satisfaction.

Limitations: This study is limited to a specific geographic area (Jember) and only focuses on Gen Z. The use of cross sectional data limits the ability to observe changes over time.

Contribution: The study contributes to marketing communication literature by providing insights into how brand awareness functions as a trust signal that connects viral exposure to lasting satisfaction. These findings are relevant for marketers in the beauty and skincare industry, especially those targeting digital native consumers.

Keywords: *Brand Awareness, Customer Satisfaction, Gen Z, Skincare, Viral Marketing*

1. INTRODUCTION

This study stems from previous findings (Latifa et al., 2023; Putri, 2023) which have highlighted how consumer behavior has transformed in the Society 5.0 era, particularly in the way consumers respond to information and make purchasing decisions digitally. These studies also revealed a shift in the consumer decision-making process. Consumer behavior is now largely influenced by frequently shared content and advertisements (Motoki et al., 2020). However, today's digital consumers are becoming more adept at distinguishing between promotional content and organic information. As a result, the effectiveness of digital strategies tends to decline due to consumers increasingly ignoring promotional messages (Malodia et al., 2022). Consequently, companies continuously strive to create unique innovations that allow their products to remain memorable in the minds of consumers.

Once a product becomes emotionally embedded in the consumer's mind, it is more likely to be recommended and shared voluntarily. However, before reaching that point, consumers must be fully aware of the product they are using. Brand awareness refers to a consumer's ability to recognize and recall a brand within a specific product category (Aaker, 1991). Today, leaving a quick impression in the minds of consumers can be achieved by leveraging viral content, though this alone may not lead to long-term brand loyalty. This is where brand awareness plays a critical role not just as a matter of recognition, but as a form of social trust built through collective experience and perception.

Viral marketing is a strategy designed to encourage consumers to voluntarily spread brand messages to others, enabling the rapid and wide dissemination of information through their social networks (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). According to (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011; Latifa et al., 2023; Putri, 2023), consumers in the Society 5.0 era particularly women aged 17 to 25 tend to make purchases online, actively seek information through social media, and are heavily influenced by electronic word of mouth (e-WOM). Viral marketing is increasingly used to influence consumer decisions, especially among Generation Z. Gen Z, those born between 1997 and 2009, is considered the first truly digital generation. They perceive digital technology as an integral part of daily life, having never experienced life without the internet.

Strong viral marketing must be supported by robust brand awareness in order to generate customer satisfaction, particularly among the Gen Z audience, who are becoming more critical and selective. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the role of brand awareness in mediating the effect of viral marketing on customer satisfaction among Gen Z, specifically in the context of skincare products one of the most popular product categories among this generation (Fitriasari et al., 2025)

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Viral Marketing

Viral marketing is often illustrated as a virus that spreads easily from one person to another. It is a marketing strategy that leverages social networks to disseminate content broadly and rapidly (Reichstein & Bruschi, 2019). According to (Pratama et al., 2022), viral marketing can be measured through three main indicators: the messenger (the person delivering the message), the message (the content being conveyed), and the environment (the context in which the message spreads). For viral marketing to be effective, the content must be unique and engaging enough to motivate consumers to voluntarily share or repost the message or advertisement (Dobeles et al., 2007) As a generation raised in the digital era, Generation Z shows a high tendency to engage with content that is visually creative, emotionally resonant, and easily accessible through social media platforms. This is largely due to their preference for fast paced, entertaining, and relatable formats of information, which are typically present in viral content (Priporas et al., 2017)(Motoki et al., 2020). Skincare products have emerged as one of the most frequently featured categories in viral content, especially on video-based platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Gen Z responds positively to

content that combines visually appealing aesthetics with emotionally engaging narratives, such as testimonials or skin transformation stories. This type of content significantly enhances a brand's chances of being recognized and remembered by consumers (Latifa et al., 2023; Putri, 2023)

2.2 Brand Awareness

Brand awareness refers to a consumer's ability to recognize and recall a brand within a specific product category (Aaker, 1991). For Generation Z, brand awareness functions not only as a brand identifier but also as an initial trust signal that influences their interest in a product. Being constantly exposed to digital content, Gen Z relies on brand awareness as a crucial filter that helps them focus attention on brands they already know and trust (Pradhan et al., 2023). Although (Aaker, 1991) defines brand awareness as a multilevel construct, this study adopts the four-tiered structure: unaware of brand, brand recognition, brand recall, and top of mind awareness as measurement indicators. Each level represents a distinct form of consumer awareness that can be captured through survey instruments (*A Complete Guide To Brand Awareness, From Theory to Practice - The Branding Journal*, n.d.).

2.3 Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction refers to a condition in which customers feel content with both the product quality and their overall experience with a brand (Kim et al., 2019). The degree of satisfaction is determined by the gap between consumers' perceptions of performance and their initial expectations. Customer satisfaction is essential because it leads to the acquisition of new customers through word of mouth (WOM) effects, and it simultaneously drives both new and repeat purchases among existing customers (Kim et al., 2019). Word of mouth is expected to be the peak outcome of a successful viral marketing strategy. Gen Z individuals often form specific social groups that reinforce their identity and sense of belonging. For a generation highly concerned with appearance and seeking instant results, skincare products represent a particularly sensitive category where satisfaction is closely tied to product claims and user experience (*37% of Gen Z overwhelmed by skincare choices*, n.d.).

The Relationship between Viral Marketing and Brand Awareness

Viral marketing is a marketing strategy that relies on the voluntary and rapid dissemination of brand messages through social networks, with the expectation that these messages will reach a broader audience within a short period (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Viral content typically evokes emotions, is easy to share, and often contains narratives that resonate with the daily lives of its audience, especially Generation Z (Dobele et al., 2007; Motoki et al., 2020). On the other hand, brand awareness is defined as the consumer's ability to recognize and recall a brand as part of a specific product category (Aaker, 1991). High brand awareness not only reflects memory of a logo or name, but also involves an understanding of the brand's reputation and the values associated with it (Keller Kevin Lane, 2013). Viral marketing holds significant potential to enhance brand awareness, particularly when viral content explicitly features or mentions the brand. Each time such content is shared, consumers are repeatedly exposed to the brand, thereby increasing the likelihood of brand recognition and recall (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). Previous research has shown that viral marketing can strengthen top of mind awareness and accelerate brand recognition among younger, socially active consumers (Faradila & Silitonga, 2025).

H1: Viral marketing has a positive effect on brand awareness.

The Relationship between Viral Marketing and Customer Satisfaction

Viral marketing is a promotional strategy that relies on the organic spread of messages from consumer to consumer through social media or digital platforms, aiming to reach a wide audience quickly (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). In practice, viral marketing is often delivered through content that is emotional,

entertaining, or informative encouraging voluntary user engagement and content sharing (Dobele et al., 2007). This strategy is especially relevant to Generation Z, a cohort that is highly active on social media and responsive to content that is visually unique, emotionally engaging, and relatable (Latifa et al., 2023; Motoki et al., 2020; Putri, 2023). Viral marketing plays a critical role in shaping consumers' initial perceptions of a product, particularly through testimonials, influencer reviews, and before and after videos commonly found on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, especially in the context of skincare product purchases. Such content not only generates curiosity but also shapes expectations and builds consumer trust in the product (Mustikasari & Widaningsih, 2019). Considering the emotional and social influence of viral marketing in forming consumer expectations and perceived product value, it is assumed that viral marketing has a positive effect on customer satisfaction particularly for skincare products among Gen Z consumers. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Viral marketing has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

The Relationship between Brand Awareness and Customer Satisfaction

Brand awareness refers to a consumer's ability to recognize and recall a brand within a particular product category (Aaker, 1991). It not only involves visual or verbal brand recognition, but also reflects the level of initial trust a consumer places in that brand (Keller Kevin Lane, 2013). When consumers are familiar with a brand, they tend to develop more structured expectations and feel a greater sense of security in making purchasing decisions, which ultimately enhances their level of satisfaction (Keller Kevin Lane, 2013). Brand awareness plays a vital role in the consumer evaluation process, especially in situations where information about product quality is incomplete or unclear. In such cases, consumers often rely on their awareness of a brand as a signal of the brand's value and credibility (Macdonald & Sharp, 2000). This is particularly relevant in the context of skincare products, where trust is crucial due to the personal nature of the product, affecting aspects like appearance and skin health. Consequently, consumers are more likely to feel satisfied when using products from brands they recognize and trust, as these brands are perceived to be more reliable in delivering on their promises (Barijan et al., 2021). Therefore, the higher the level of brand awareness, the greater the likelihood of customer satisfaction resulting from the product usage experience. Based on this rationale, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Brand awareness has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

The Mediating Role of Brand Awareness

Viral marketing generates rapid brand exposure through engaging and shareable content; however, not all viral content automatically leads to customer satisfaction. (Luh Putu Gangga Rahayu & Made Wulandari Kusumadewi, 2023) on Lemonilo consumers found that brand awareness significantly mediates the effect of viral marketing on purchase decisions. This indicates that viral marketing can influence purchasing behavior only if it effectively builds brand awareness first. A similar pattern was observed in the fast food service context in Jordan, where (Muala, 2018) demonstrated that brand awareness is one of the key dimensions of viral marketing with a direct and significant impact on customer satisfaction. This construct becomes even more relevant when applied to Generation Z's purchase of skincare products. Viral marketing may capture initial consumer attention, but in order to achieve satisfaction, consumers must clearly recognize and recall the brand. Brand awareness functions as a bridge that transforms initial impressions into meaningful experiences that trigger satisfaction. Without strong awareness, viral messages may remain surface level, failing to create emotional resonance or perceived quality. Brand awareness helps consumers associate the claims made in viral content with their expectations and the actual outcomes of product use. This alignment is crucial, as satisfaction largely depends on how well the actual experience meets or exceeds expectations. Based on the conceptual framework above, the following mediation hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Brand awareness mediates the relationship between viral marketing and customer satisfaction.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative approach using a survey method to examine the influence of viral marketing on customer satisfaction, with brand awareness as a mediating variable in the context of skincare product usage among Generation Z in Jember, Indonesia. The population in this study consisted of individuals aged 10–25 years who are active social media users and have experience using skincare products. The sample size was determined to be 100 respondents, based on Roscoe’s formula. A purposive sampling technique was used, with the following inclusion criteria: aged between 10–25 years, have used skincare products, and have been exposed to viral marketing content related to skincare on social media. Data collection was conducted through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms, using a 4-point Likert scale to measure responses. Data analysis was carried out using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) based on the Partial Least Squares (PLS) method. The variables in this study were defined as follows:

1. Viral Marketing, with three dimensions: the messenger, the message, and the environment(Pratama et al., 2022).
2. Brand Awareness, measured using four indicators: unaware of brand, brand recognition, brand recall, and top of mind(Aaker, 1991).
3. Customer Satisfaction, measured through three indicators: expectation fulfillment, willingness to repurchase, and willingness to recommend(Setyo, 2017).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Measurement Model Evaluation

All research indicators met the requirements for validity and reliability. The loading factor values exceeded 0.70; the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all constructs was above 0.50; and both the Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach’s Alpha values were above 0.70. These results indicate strong internal consistency and convergent validity. A summary of these findings is presented in Table 1 below:

Tabel 1. AVE, Composite Reliability, and Cronbach’s Alpha for Each Construct

Konstruk	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach’s Alpha
Viral Marketing	0.566	0.844	0.745
Brand Awareness	0.681	0.890	0.839
Customer Satisfaction	0.658	0.884	0.816

Source: Data processed using SmartPLS (2025).

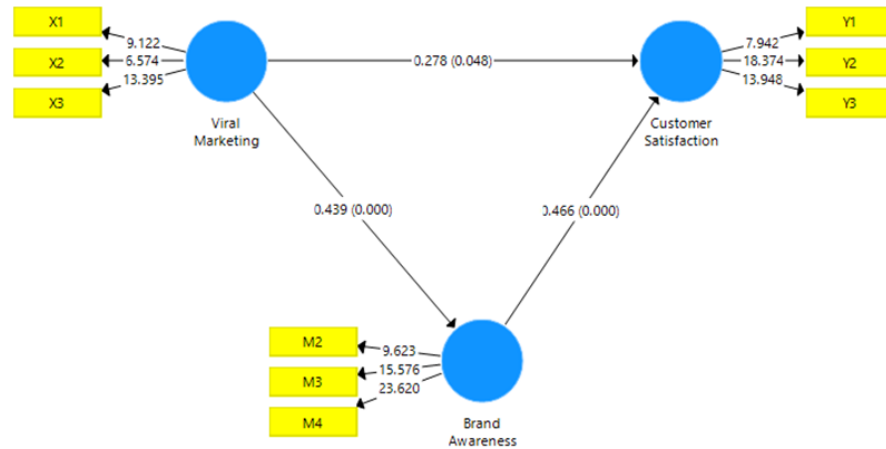
Discriminant validity was also confirmed based on the Fornell Larcker criterion and HTMT values, all of which were below 0.90. These results indicate that the constructs in the model are adequately distinct from one another.

Structural Model Evaluation

The structural model analysis indicated that the model has a satisfactory explanatory power. The R² value for Brand Awareness was 0.193, and for Customer Satisfaction it was 0.408, meaning that viral marketing and brand awareness together explain 40.8% of the variance in customer satisfaction. The Q² predictive relevance values were 0.121 for Brand Awareness and 0.226 for Customer Satisfaction, indicating moderate

predictive capability. In addition, the model demonstrated a good fit, with an SRMR value of 0.099, which is below the threshold of 0.10.

Figure 1. Estimated Model Bootstrapping Results



Hypothesis Testing

The results of hypothesis testing are presented in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Hypothesis	Hypothesis	Hypothesis	Hypothesis	Hypothesis
H1	Viral Marketing → Brand Awareness	0.439	5.809	0.000	Accepted
H2	Viral Marketing → Customer Satisfaction	0.285	3.367	0.001	Accepted
H3	Brand Awareness → Customer Satisfaction	0.434	4.596	0.000	Accepted
H4	Viral Marketing → Brand Awareness → Customer Satisfaction	0.191	3.784	0.000	Accepted

Source: Data processed using SmartPLS (2025).

Hypothesis 1: Viral Marketing → Brand Awareness

The findings indicate that viral marketing has a positive and significant effect on brand awareness ($\beta = 0.439$; $p < 0.001$). This result supports the theory proposed (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011), which asserts that viral marketing enables the rapid dissemination of brand messages through digital social networks. Viral content that is emotional, informative, and easily shareable can enhance brand exposure, especially among Generation Z, who are highly active on social media platforms. This study is also consistent with (Pane et al., 2024), who found that viral marketing via TikTok Shop significantly contributes to increasing brand awareness. However, previous studies have not specifically explored the skincare product context. Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by emphasizing that in the skincare category where brand trust and consistency are crucial, viral marketing can serve as an effective entry point for introducing and embedding a brand into the minds of Gen Z consumers.

Hypothesis 2: Viral Marketing → Customer Satisfaction

Viral marketing was also found to have a significant effect on customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.285$; $p < 0.01$). This finding suggests that exposure to engaging viral content can influence consumers' initial perceptions of a product, which in turn leads to satisfaction when the actual usage experience aligns with the expectations shaped by that content. This result is supported by (Rahmalida & Susan, 2024), who investigated viral strategies employed by local skincare brands and found that viral marketing influences brand trust and purchase intention. However, their study did not focus on customer satisfaction as a primary outcome. Therefore, the present study contributes further by emphasizing that viral marketing not only builds purchase interest, but can also foster customer satisfaction provided that the brand successfully delivers on the expectations set by its viral messaging.

Hypothesis 3: Brand Awareness → Customer Satisfaction

The influence of brand awareness on customer satisfaction was also found to be significant ($\beta = 0.434$; $p < 0.001$). This result aligns with the theories proposed by (Aaker, 1991; Keller Kevin Lane, 2013), which suggest that brand awareness fosters trust and reduces uncertainty in consumer decision making processes. For Generation Z who are heavily exposed to digital content brand awareness serves as a primary filter in assessing the credibility of a product, particularly within the skincare category. Supporting this, (Hati & Yuniati, 2023) on NPURE skincare products found that influencers and psychological factors significantly influenced Gen Z's brand awareness, which in turn affected user satisfaction. These findings reinforce the idea that higher levels of brand awareness lead to greater consumer satisfaction, especially when awareness is shaped through trusted and relatable digital content.

Hypothesis 4: Mediation of Brand Awareness

The mediation analysis revealed that brand awareness significantly mediates the relationship between viral marketing and customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.191$; $p < 0.001$). This finding indicates that viral marketing does not automatically lead to customer satisfaction; rather, it requires the presence of brand recognition and awareness as a connecting mechanism. This result is consistent with (Luh Putu Gangga Rahayu & Made Wulandari Kusumadewi, 2023), which stated that brand awareness plays a mediating role in the influence of viral marketing on purchase decisions. However, only a few studies have explored this mediation effect within personal care product categories such as skincare, particularly among Generation Z.

Therefore, this research provides a meaningful contribution by emphasizing that the effectiveness of viral marketing in generating customer satisfaction largely depends on the strength of the brand awareness established in the process.

5. CONCLUSION

This research aimed to analyze the effect of viral marketing on customer satisfaction of skincare products among Generation Z in Jember Regency, with brand awareness as a mediating variable. The findings revealed that viral marketing has a positive impact on both brand awareness and customer satisfaction. These results reinforce the position of viral marketing as an effective strategy for reaching digital consumers who are highly responsive to visual, emotional, and shareable content. Furthermore, brand awareness was found to be a crucial factor, not only influenced by viral marketing but also contributing directly to customer satisfaction. In this context, brand awareness goes beyond mere brand recognition; it reflects social trust, formed through consumer exposure and experience. The mediation analysis also confirmed that brand awareness serves as a significant bridge between the appeal of viral content and sustained customer satisfaction. These findings contribute to the theoretical development of the Stimulus Organism Response (SOR) model, positioning brand awareness as a key mediator in digital consumer behavior. In conclusion, viral marketing strategies that are not supported by strong brand awareness risk creating expectations that are misaligned with actual consumer experience. Therefore, skincare brands targeting Generation Z should develop brand communication that is not only virally appealing but also capable of embedding consistent brand identity and values to foster longterm customer satisfaction.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample was limited to Generation Z respondents in the Jember region, which restricts the generalizability of the results to other geographic areas or age groups. Second, data collection was conducted at a single point in time, which does not capture potential changes in consumer attitudes and behaviors over time. Third, the scope of variables examined was relatively limited and did not include other relevant psychological factors such as brand trust, perceived risk, or perceived credibility, which may also influence customer satisfaction. To address these limitations, future research is encouraged to expand the geographical scope and include a more diverse respondent base to increase the representativeness of the findings. Additionally, longitudinal data collection could provide insights into how the effects of viral marketing and brand awareness evolve over time. Future studies may also consider incorporating other variables, such as brand trust, electronic word of mouth (eWOM), or customer engagement, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Generation Z's consumer behavior in the context of skincare product selection.

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