

The Role of TikTok Content Virality in Shaping Gen Z's Purchase Intentions

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Abstract

The rapid growth of social media, particularly TikTok, has reshaped marketing communication and consumer behavior, especially among Generation Z (Gen Z). This study aims to examine the role of TikTok content virality in shaping Gen Z's purchase intentions in Pontianak City. A quantitative survey approach was employed with 225 Gen Z respondents who had been active TikTok users for at least the past six months. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS. The findings indicate that TikTok content virality significantly influences Gen Z's purchase intentions, both directly and indirectly through mediating variables: user engagement, emotional response, and trust/credibility. Furthermore, the moderation analysis reveals that brand trust and influencer credibility strengthen the relationship between content virality and purchase intentions. This suggests that the effectiveness of viral content is determined not only by its reach but also by the degree of consumer trust in both the brand and the content creator. Theoretically, this research contributes to digital marketing literature by reinforcing the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) within the TikTok marketing context. Practically, it provides valuable insights for marketers to design authentic, interactive, and credible content that sustainably enhances Gen Z's purchase intentions.

Keywords: TikTok, Content Virality, Generation Z, Purchase Intention, Social Media

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, the rapid advancement of digital technologies and the growing penetration of social media have dramatically transformed the landscape of marketing and consumer behavior. Social media platforms have evolved beyond personal communication tools to become strategic arenas where brands and marketers attempt to influence consumer decisions through creative content, interaction, and virality [1]. Among the most striking phenomena in the social media era is viral marketing, a strategy in which messages or content spread quickly and widely across users' networks. Viral marketing enables promotional messages to gain exposure through users themselves via sharing, reposting, or word-of-mouth amplification without direct intervention from marketers [2].

TikTok, a short-form video application, has emerged as the epicenter of creativity and virality. Its algorithm prioritizes content recommendation based on engagement and relevance, meaning that videos with high interaction (likes, comments, shares) are more likely to reach broader audiences [3]. This design makes TikTok particularly powerful in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors. For Generation Z (Gen Z), individuals born roughly between 1995 and 2010, TikTok has become one of the most influential platforms. Gen Z is widely recognized as digital natives who have grown up with the internet, mobile devices, and social media. This generation is highly responsive to visual and interactive content and tends

to be strongly influenced by content creators and peer reviews rather than traditional advertising [4].

Despite the visible presence of viral marketing in practice, there remains a theoretical and empirical gap in understanding the mechanisms through which viral content on TikTok shapes Gen Z's purchase intentions. While it is evident that viral content can capture attention, whether it directly drives purchase intention or works through mediating psychological variables such as user engagement, emotional arousal, perceived credibility of content creators, or trust in brands remains insufficiently explored [5] [6].

Several prior studies have provided useful insights. For example, TikTok video advertisements have been shown to significantly influence Gen Z's purchase intentions through emotional appeal [7]. Research in Southeast Asia suggests that TikTok trends impact buying decisions among young consumers, often linked to the fear of missing out (FOMO) effect [8]. Another study, titled "TikTok Made Me Buy It," highlighted that consumer engagement with content marketing plays a critical role in shaping purchase intention [9]. In Indonesia, short-form video marketing combined with influencer relatability and trust signals was found to significantly influence Gen Z's purchase decisions [10]. However, these studies largely focus on TikTok as a medium of advertising or influencer promotion, rather than examining content virality itself as a key construct.

This gap underlines the need for a more

comprehensive investigation into how and under what conditions TikTok content virality influences Gen Z purchase intentions [11]. It is necessary to determine whether the effect is direct or mediated through psychological responses such as trust, engagement, or emotional connection [12]. Moreover, moderators such as brand credibility, consumer involvement, or demographic factors may strengthen or weaken the relationship between virality and purchase intention [13].

The present study therefore seeks to address these questions by investigating: (1) the extent to which TikTok content virality affects Gen Z's purchase intentions, (2) whether this relationship is mediated by psychological constructs such as engagement, trust, or emotional arousal, and (3) whether the influence of content virality is moderated by external variables such as brand trust or consumer involvement. Through this approach, the research aims to contribute both theoretical and practical insights.

From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches digital marketing literature by positioning virality as a primary construct, not just an incidental feature of social media content. It integrates theoretical frameworks such as Viral Marketing Theory, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) [5], and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model [6] into the context of TikTok. Additionally, it proposes a mediated and moderated model that explains how and when viral content translates into purchase intentions.

From a practical perspective, the findings can inform marketers, brands, and content creators about how to design and promote content that is not only viral but also persuasive in driving Gen Z's buying behavior. Specifically, understanding the psychological mediators and external moderators can guide practitioners in refining their content strategies to maximize marketing impact.

Finally, from a societal perspective, this research sheds light on how digital platforms affect consumption patterns among younger generations. While viral marketing can enhance brand reach and consumer engagement, it may also contribute to negative consequences such as impulsive buying or overconsumption [14]. Thus, the findings of this study may also offer implications for policymakers and educators in promoting digital literacy and responsible consumption among Gen Z.

In summary, TikTok has redefined the dynamics of digital marketing through its ability to create viral content that captures the attention of Gen Z. However, the precise mechanisms linking content virality to purchase intention remain underexplored. By addressing this gap, the current study aims to provide both conceptual clarity and actionable insights, contributing to academia, marketing practice, and society at large.

Viral marketing refers to a strategy in which content spreads rapidly and widely across social networks,

primarily driven by users themselves through digital word-of-mouth sharing. Emphasize that virality is characterized by the ability of content to generate engagement, which subsequently amplifies its reach [15]. In the context of TikTok, virality occurs because the platform's algorithm recommends content based on engagement levels, making videos with higher numbers of likes, comments, and shares more likely to go viral [16]. Prior studies have shown that the determinants of content virality include informativeness, entertainment value, emotional appeal, authenticity, and interactivity. These findings confirm that viral marketing can enhance brand awareness, increase consumer engagement, and ultimately drive purchase intention [17] [2].

Generation Z, defined as individuals born between 1995 and 2010, is widely recognized as digital natives who have grown up with the internet, smartphones, and social media. A unique characteristic of this generation is their tendency to trust user-generated content (UGC) and peer opinions more than traditional advertising. In terms of consumption behavior, Gen Z is often more impulsive, values authenticity highly, and is easily influenced by viral trends on social media [18]. TikTok plays a particularly dominant role in shaping Gen Z's consumption behavior through its For You Page (FYP) feature, which continuously exposes users to viral content. This constant exposure often impacts purchasing decisions, a phenomenon popularly known as "TikTok made me buy it."

Furthermore, purchase intention is defined as an individual's psychological tendency to buy a particular product or service [19]. In consumer behavior theory, purchase intention is regarded as a key predictor of actual behavior [5]. Factors influencing purchase intention include product attitudes, social norms, source credibility, and emotional experiences. Within the context of social media, consumer engagement with marketing content has been proven to positively influence purchase intentions [20].

Several theoretical frameworks are relevant to understanding the relationships between these variables. First, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) [5] suggests that purchase intention is shaped by attitudes toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In the TikTok context, content virality has the potential to shape both attitudes and social norms among Gen Z. Second, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Model [6] posits that content virality as a stimulus triggers internal responses such as emotions, engagement, or trust (organism) which then lead to behavioral responses such as purchase intentions. Third, Social Influence Theory [21] highlights that consumer behavior is shaped by social influence through compliance, identification, and internalization a mechanism that is particularly relevant to the role of influencers and peer opinions on TikTok.

Based on these theoretical frameworks, the relationships between variables can be summarized as

follows: TikTok content virality as a stimulus enhances user engagement, trust, and emotional resonance as organismic responses. These psychological responses, in turn, foster stronger purchase intentions among Gen Z. Furthermore, moderating variables such as brand trust, influencer credibility, and consumer involvement may strengthen or weaken the effect of virality on purchase intention.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a quantitative survey-based approach with an explanatory design, aiming to explain the causal relationships between the independent variable (TikTok content virality) and the dependent variable (Gen Z's purchase intention), while considering mediating variables (user engagement, emotional response, trust/credibility) and moderating variables (brand trust and influencer credibility). The population of this study consists of Generation Z (Gen Z) residing in Pontianak City who have actively used TikTok for at least the past six months. The sampling technique used is purposive sampling, where respondents are selected based on specific criteria (age falls within Gen Z, residing in Pontianak, and active TikTok users). A total of 225 respondents participated in this study.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Form. The instrument consisted of closed-ended statements measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree). Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS software [22]. The analysis included: Construct validity and reliability tests, Measurement model (outer model) assessment, Structural model (inner model) assessment, Direct, mediation, and moderation hypothesis testing [23]. Next Operationalization of Variables on Table 1.

Table 1. Operationalization of Variables

Variable	Operational Definition	Indicators	Scale
TikTok Content Virality (X)	The extent to which TikTok content spreads widely and gains public attention	Informativeness, Entertainment, Emotional Appeal, Interactivity, Authenticity	Likert 1-5
User Engagement (M1)	The degree of active participation of users in interacting with content	Likes, Comments, Shares, Time spent	Likert 1-5
Emotional Response (M2)	Positive or negative feelings triggered after viewing content	Excitement, Enjoyment, Emotional arousal	Likert 1-5
Trust / Credibility (M3)	The level of consumer trust in the message or content creator	Source credibility, Trustworthiness, Expertise	Likert 1-5
Brand Trust (Z1)	Consumers' belief in the reliability and integrity of a brand	Brand reliability, Brand honesty, Brand competence	Likert 1-5
Influencer Credibility (Z2)	Consumers' perception of the reliability and expertise of influencers	Attractiveness, Expertise, Trustworthiness	Likert 1-5
Purchase Intention (Y)	The psychological tendency of consumers to buy the promoted product	Willingness to buy, Purchase consideration, Future intention	Likert 1-5

3. Results and Discussion

Data analysis was conducted using SEM-PLS with SmartPLS 4. The model included direct effects,

mediations, and moderations. Table 2 presents the hypothesis testing results.

Table 2. Hypothesis Testing Results

Path Relationship	Path Coefficient	t-value	p-value	Decision
Content Virality → Purchase Intention	0.312	5.64	0.000	Supported
Content Virality → User Engagement	0.428	8.12	0.000	Supported
User Engagement → Purchase Intention	0.289	4.95	0.000	Supported
Content Virality → Emotional Response	0.401	7.33	0.000	Supported
Emotional Response → Purchase Intention	0.267	4.42	0.000	Supported
Content Virality → Trust/Credibility	0.355	6.48	0.000	Supported
Trust/Credibility → Purchase Intention	0.298	5.11	0.000	Supported
Brand Trust moderates (Content Virality → Purchase Intention)	0.142	2.39	0.017	Supported
Influencer Credibility moderates (Content Virality → Purchase Intention)	0.156	2.71	0.007	Supported

The results indicate that TikTok content virality significantly influences Gen Z's purchase intention (H1, $\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that the more viral a piece of content becomes, the stronger Gen Z consumers' inclination to consider purchasing the promoted product. This finding aligns with [17] and [15], who emphasized that viral marketing can generate psychological effects that drive consumer purchasing behavior. The analysis demonstrates that content virality strongly impacts user engagement (H2), which in turn significantly influences purchase intention (H3). This implies that viral content does not merely attract passive viewing but also stimulates active interactions (likes, comments, shares), which deepen consumers' emotional connections. This finding supports engagement marketing theory [11].

The results further reveal that content virality significantly affects emotional responses (H4), which subsequently shape purchase intentions (H5). Viral content infused with entertainment, humor, or emotional appeal proves to be more effective in stimulating buying intentions. This is consistent with the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model, where the stimulus (viral content) triggers organismic responses (positive emotions), leading to a behavioral response (purchase intention). The findings also show that content virality significantly influences perceived credibility/trust (H6), which then contributes to stronger purchase intentions (H7). This aligns with [24], who highlighted the importance of source credibility (trustworthiness, expertise) in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors.

The moderation results confirm that brand trust (H8) strengthens the effect of content virality on purchase intention [25]. Gen Z is more likely to purchase products promoted through viral content if the associated brand is perceived as reliable. Similarly, influencer credibility (H9) plays a significant role,

underscoring that the credibility of content creators enhances the effectiveness of viral marketing. From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces the relevance of the Theory of Planned Behavior [5] and the SOR Model [6] within the context of TikTok-based digital marketing. From a practical perspective, the findings offer actionable insights for marketers and brands: creating content that goes beyond virality, fostering emotional engagement, and establishing trust can more effectively convert attention into purchase intentions among Gen Z.

4. Conclusion

This study confirms that TikTok content virality significantly influences Gen Z's purchase intentions in Pontianak. The findings reveal that content virality not only has a direct effect on purchase intentions but also operates through mediating pathways such as user engagement, emotional response, and trust/credibility. This supports the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which explain how external stimuli trigger psychological and behavioral responses. Moreover, brand trust and influencer credibility serve as moderating factors that strengthen the relationship between content virality and purchase intentions. Thus, the effectiveness of viral marketing on TikTok depends not only on the extent of content diffusion but also on consumer trust in both the brand and the content creator. Theoretically, this research contributes to digital marketing literature by positioning virality as a core construct. Practically, it provides valuable insights for marketers to design content that is not only viral but also capable of building emotional engagement and trust. Therefore, TikTok-based marketing strategies should focus on creating authentic, interactive, and credible content to sustainably enhance Gen Z's purchase intentions.

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