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Engaging Generation Z through K-popfication: The Role of Buzz and Viral Marketing in Building MSME Brand Awareness

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z (Gen Z), born between 1997 and 2012, is a digital-native consumer group whose purchasing behavior is strongly shaped by cultural trends such as K-pop. For Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Indonesia, reaching this demographic is crucial for building brand awareness but remains a challenge. Previous studies have discussed viral marketing and cultural branding separately, yet limited research has integrated buzz marketing, viral marketing, and K-popfication in one model. This study aims to examine how these strategies influence Gen Z consumers' brand awareness of MSME products. A quantitative survey was conducted with 153 Gen Z respondents who actively use social media and have purchased MSME products. Data analysis used Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with SmartPLS 4. The outer model confirmed convergent validity, discriminant validity, and construct reliability. The inner model produced an R^2 value of 0.690, indicating that the three strategies explained 69% of the variance in brand awareness. The results showed that buzz marketing had no significant effect, viral marketing had a positive but insignificant effect, while K-popfication had a strong and significant effect on Gen Z brand awareness. These findings highlight that Gen Z consumers are more responsive to cultural adaptation, especially through K-pop elements, than to conventional marketing approaches. Theoretically, this study enriches the Hierarchy of Effects framework in cultural marketing. Practically, it suggests that MSMEs should design campaigns that resonate with Gen Z's digital habits and cultural identity to strengthen brand awareness.

INTRODUCTION

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Indonesia have experienced rapid development in the last two decades. According to the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs (2023), MSMEs contribute more than sixty percent to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and absorb more than ninety percent of the workforce. This makes the MSME sector the backbone of the Indonesian economy and highlights its strategic role in supporting national economic resilience. Nevertheless, many MSMEs still face challenges in building consumer recognition due to limited brand awareness. This situation hinders the sustainability and competitiveness of MSMEs, particularly in the digital economy era where competition is becoming increasingly dynamic.

Brand awareness is a key factor in ensuring business sustainability. Product quality alone is not sufficient if consumers are unable to recognize or recall the brand. This challenge becomes more urgent with the emergence of Generation Z (Gen Z) as a dominant consumer group. Gen Z, born between 1997 and 2012, grew up with digital technology and social media. As digital natives, they are accustomed to instant access to information, visual content, and interactive communication. Their consumption preferences differ significantly from previous generations, as they prefer fast, visual, and emotionally engaging content (Sasmita & Suki, 2020).

Conventional marketing tools, such as television commercials and printed brochures, are becoming less effective in reaching Gen Z consumers. Instead, more creative strategies that emphasize digital interactivity are required. In this regard, buzz marketing and viral marketing emerge as relevant approaches. Buzz marketing is a communication strategy that emphasizes conversations and word of mouth to create excitement about a product or service. Hutter et al. (2021) demonstrated that buzz marketing effectively builds emotional engagement and enhances brand recall, especially among younger consumers. Viral marketing, by contrast, aims to disseminate content rapidly and widely through digital platforms. According to Choi and Lee (2020), viral marketing has the capacity to create extensive reach within a short period and at relatively low cost, particularly when the content aligns with the values and interests of the audience.

Beyond these strategies, cultural phenomena also play a role in shaping consumer behavior. The globalization of Korean popular culture (Hallyu), particularly through the K-Pop industry, has become a significant driver of youth consumption patterns worldwide. Jin (2016) explained that K-Pop has influenced not only lifestyle but also marketing strategies, giving rise to the concept of K-popfication. In this context, K-popfication refers to the integration of K-Pop cultural elements—such as music, fashion, aesthetics, and idol endorsements—into marketing campaigns. Kim and Kim (2020) emphasized that incorporating K-Pop elements into branding strategies is an effective way to build emotional connections with Gen Z, thereby strengthening

brand loyalty and awareness. Empirical findings by Park and Lin (2020) also indicate that the use of K-Pop elements increases brand recall, particularly among young consumers.

Several local MSMEs have begun adopting these strategies by creating K-Pop-inspired product designs or collaborating with fan communities, demonstrating how cultural relevance enhances brand positioning. Nevertheless, previous studies have largely examined each variable in isolation. For example, Choi and Lee (2020) focused on the potential of viral marketing in generating brand memories through authentic and emotional packaging. Similarly, Lee et al. (2021) highlighted the role of cultural values, such as Korean identity, in shaping consumer behavior and influencing product choices. While these studies provide valuable insights, they do not comprehensively analyze the combined effect of buzz marketing, viral marketing, and K-popification on brand awareness.

The absence of integrated analysis represents a research gap that needs to be addressed. MSMEs with limited resources require efficient yet impactful branding strategies. Examining these three approaches simultaneously can provide a more holistic understanding of how to strengthen brand awareness in the Gen Z segment. This study is designed to fill that gap by analyzing the individual and combined influence of buzz marketing, viral marketing, and K-popification on brand awareness among Gen Z consumers of MSME products.

The novelty of this research lies in its simultaneous assessment of three contemporary strategies that have not previously been examined together in the context of MSMEs. By integrating buzz marketing, viral marketing, and K-popification into a single analytical framework, this study contributes to the literature on digital marketing communication and consumer behavior. At the same time, it offers practical implications for MSMEs, providing guidance on how to adopt creative and resource-efficient branding approaches aligned with Gen Z preferences.

Thus, the main objective of this research is to evaluate the influence of buzz marketing, viral marketing, and K-popification, both separately and in combination, on the brand awareness of Gen Z consumers of MSME products. The findings are expected to enrich academic discourse on digital marketing strategies while also serving as practical recommendations for MSME actors in enhancing competitiveness in a highly digitalized and culturally driven market environment.

At the beginning of each paragraph, it is straight and between paragraphs with 6 spaces (see template). Written on A4 format paper with the introduction of 400-800 words, Times New Roman 12pt, 1.15 spaces. Sentences are composed in a passive form, without mentioning the author's name, as well as other pronouns, such as "we" or "I". Numbers ranging from 1 to 10 as a measure of quantity, must be typed in narrative form (words), except for the numbers for Tables and Figures. For example six days (not 6 days).

The introduction contains state-of-the-art explaining the existence of research problems that need to be answered through research activities. This section explains the theories within the scope of the research, existing phenomena, as well as the gap between the theories and the facts. This section also outlines the theories explaining the relationship among researched variables, relevant research results, and hypothesis. The relationships between current and previous research, as well as contribution to modern science, are also explained. Finally, this section is closed with the statement of problems/research objectives, and the novelty of the research.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employed a quantitative approach with a survey method to analyze the influence of buzz marketing, viral marketing, and K-popfication on brand awareness among Generation Z consumers of MSME products. The quantitative design was chosen because it enables systematic testing of the formulated hypotheses and provides empirical evidence regarding the relationships among the studied variables.

The population in this study consisted of Generation Z consumers, defined as individuals aged fifteen to twenty-six years who actively use social media and have experience purchasing MSME products. This population was considered relevant because Gen Z represents the segment most exposed to digital marketing trends and K-pop culture, which are central to this research. Given the large and heterogeneous nature of the population, purposive sampling was applied to select respondents who met the research criteria: who are Gen Z and purchase SMES product by online. A total of one hundred fifty-three respondents participated in the study, and this number met the minimum sample size requirements for multiple linear regression analysis.

The data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via digital platforms commonly used by Gen Z. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended statements measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The instrument was designed to capture perceptions of buzz marketing, viral marketing, K-popfication, and brand awareness. Prior to distribution, the questionnaire items were adapted from previous studies and adjusted to the context of MSMEs and Gen Z consumer behavior to ensure contextual relevance.

The operationalization of variables in this study was as follows. The independent variables comprised buzz marketing (X1), viral marketing (X2), and K-popfication (X3). Buzz marketing (X1) was measured by indicators related to consumer conversations, word of mouth, and excitement (Wiertz & de Ruyter, 2007), generated around MSME products. Viral marketing (X2) was assessed through indicators of content virality, shareability, and digital platform exposure (Putri & Aditya, 2022). K-popfication (X3) was measured through indicators of cultural adaptation, use of K-pop elements, and emotional connections with K-pop fans (Kim & Kim, 2020). The dependent variable was brand awareness (Y), which was assessed through

brand recognition and brand recall indicators (Aaker D, 1991).

Data in this study were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling with Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) through SmartPLS software to examine the influence of buzz marketing, viral marketing, and K-popfication on brand awareness among Generation Z consumers of MSME products. SEM-PLS was selected because it is suitable for analyzing complex models with multiple latent variables and indicators, as well as for relatively small to medium sample sizes. The analysis included evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) to ensure construct validity and reliability through loading factor, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliability, and Cronbach’s Alpha, followed by the structural model (inner model) to assess the relationships among variables using R², predictive relevance (Q²), and bootstrapping procedures for significance testing. By applying the guidelines of Ghazali and Latan (2015) and Hair, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2019), this method provided a comprehensive approach to answering the research questions related to the role of digital marketing strategies and cultural adaptation in shaping brand awareness of Gen Z consumers toward MSME products. Based on the research framework, the following hypotheses were tested:

H1: Buzz marketing has a positive and significant influence on brand awareness among Generation Z consumers of MSME products.

H2: Viral marketing has a positive and significant influence on brand awareness among Generation Z consumers of MSME products.

H3: K-popfication has a positive and significant influence on brand awareness among Generation Z consumers of MSME products.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Outer Model

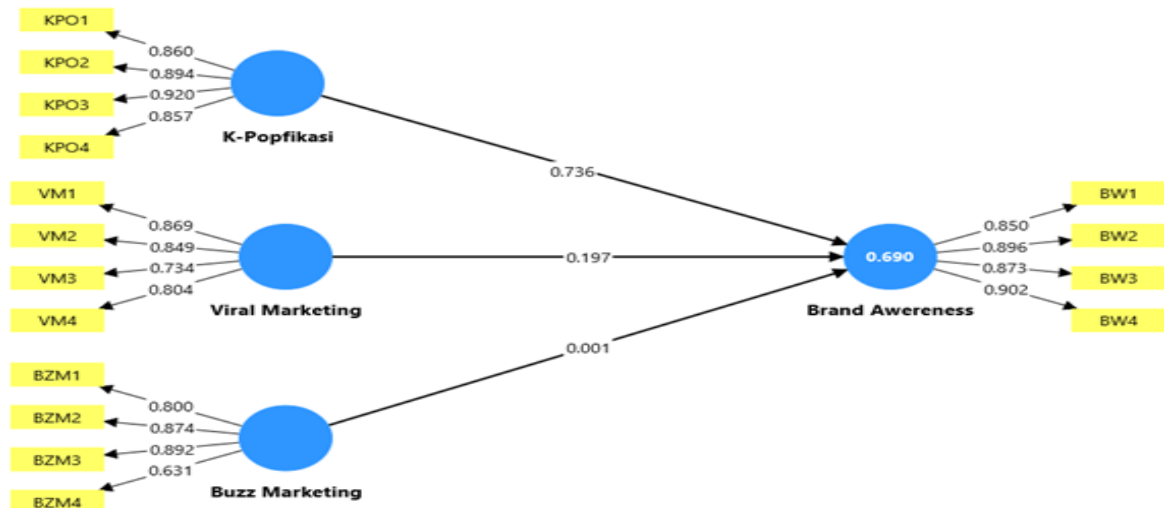


Figure. Outer Model of K-popfication, Viral Marketing and Buzz Marketing on Brand Awareness among Generation Z on MSMEs Product

The evaluation of the outer model was conducted to examine the explanatory power and predictive relevance of the research framework. The R^2 value for brand awareness was 0.690, indicating that buzz marketing, viral marketing, and K-popfication collectively explained 69% of the variance in brand awareness (Figure 1). According to Hair et al. (2019), this value falls within the strong category, demonstrating that the three constructs provide substantial explanatory contribution to the dependent variable. The adjusted R^2 value of 0.684 also confirmed the stability of the model, suggesting that the findings are not the result of overfitting. Furthermore, the Q^2_{predict} value of 0.646 indicated that the model possesses strong predictive relevance, which means it is capable of generating accurate predictions beyond the sample used in the analysis. The SRMR value of 0.063, which is below the threshold of 0.08, further confirmed that the structural model has a good overall fit (Ghozali & Latan, 2015).

In addition to explanatory power, the structural model also demonstrated predictive accuracy and efficiency. The RMSE value of 0.604 and MAE of 0.440 indicated that the model has a low level of prediction error, which strengthens its reliability in practical applications. These results imply that the integration of buzz marketing, viral marketing, and K-popfication provides a theoretically grounded and empirically valid framework for explaining the dynamics of brand awareness among Generation Z consumers. More specifically, the findings underscore that digital and cultural marketing strategies are capable of shaping consumer awareness effectively, supporting the theoretical foundation provided by the Hierarchy of Effects Theory. This suggests that the stimuli created by marketing communications—particularly those linked to cultural symbols such as K-pop—are able to trigger the awareness stage, which is the first step in the process of forming consumer attitudes and behaviors toward MSME brands.

Inner Model. The evaluation of the inner model was conducted to analyze the explanatory power and predictive relevance of the research framework. The R^2 value for brand awareness was 0.690, which indicates that buzz marketing, viral marketing, and K-popfication together explained 69% of the variance in brand awareness. According to Hair et al. (2019), this value is considered strong, showing that the predictors provide substantial explanatory contribution. The adjusted R^2 value of 0.684 further confirmed model stability, while the Q^2_{predict} value of 0.646 demonstrated strong predictive relevance. The RMSE (0.604) and MAE (0.440) also indicated relatively low prediction error, confirming the robustness of the model (Haryono, 2016; Savitri et al., 2021; Setiaman, 2023). In addition, the SRMR value of 0.063, which is below the recommended threshold of 0.08, showed that the model achieved a good overall fit (Ghozali & Latan, 2015; Hamid & Anwar, 2019). Based on the path coefficient analysis, the relationships between the independent and dependent variables showed different levels of significance, which are discussed in detail as follows.

Table 1. Path Coefficient of Brand Awareness of MSMEs

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
Buzz Marketing -> Brand Awareness	0.001	0.006	0.061	0.016	0.987
K-Popfikasi -> Brand Awareness	0.736	0.745	0.080	9,176	0.000
Viral Marketing -> Brand Awareness	0.197	0.189	0.109	1,806	0.071

H1: Buzz Marketing and Brand Awareness. The results showed that buzz marketing had no significant influence on brand awareness, with a T-statistic of 0.016 (< 1.96) and a P-value of 0.987 (> 0.05). This finding suggests that word-of-mouth conversations generated by MSMEs are not strong enough to significantly impact Generation Z's brand awareness (Maulina & Pasaribu, 2024). While Hutter et al. (2021) argued that buzz marketing can increase emotional engagement and recall, such effects may be more pronounced in large-scale campaigns with stronger narrative appeal. In the case of MSMEs, the limited scope and resources available for buzz marketing could explain the lack of measurable impact. This finding also indicates that simply creating conversations is not sufficient without integrating them into broader and more creative marketing communication strategies.

H2: K-popification and Brand Awareness. The K-popification variable exhibited a strong and significant influence on brand awareness, with a T-statistic of 9.176 (> 1.96) and a P-value of 0.000 (< 0.05). This result confirms that integrating cultural elements, particularly those related to K-pop, effectively strengthens brand awareness among Gen Z consumers. Kim and Kim (2020) and Park and Lin (2020) emphasized that K-pop culture can be a powerful driver of emotional bonds between brands and young consumers, increasing recall and identity-based attachment. This is also consistent with the Hierarchy of Effects Theory, which highlights awareness as the first stage in consumer attitude formation (Maulina & Pasaribu, 2024). By leveraging cultural relevance, MSMEs are able to engage consumers more deeply, aligning with Lee et al. (2021), who explained that popular culture significantly shapes youth consumption behavior. These findings show that cultural adaptation in marketing is not only a trend but also an effective strategic tool for building awareness in the digital era.

H3: Viral Marketing and Brand Awareness. The results indicated that viral marketing had a positive but insignificant influence on brand awareness, with a T-statistic of 1.806 (< 1.96) and a P-value of 0.071 (> 0.05). Although the direction of the relationship was positive, the lack of significance suggests that viral marketing strategies employed by MSMEs did not achieve the level of resonance required to substantially impact awareness. According to Choi and Lee

(2020), viral marketing becomes effective when content is highly engaging, authentic, and aligned with audience values (Zahrah et al., 2025). In the context of MSMEs, limited resources for producing creative, shareable content may hinder their ability to achieve viral effects. This finding also reinforces the view of Sasmita and Suki (2020) that Gen Z responds strongly to digital content only when it provides instant value, entertainment, or cultural connection. Therefore, while viral marketing has potential, it requires higher levels of creativity and alignment with youth culture to become an impactful tool for brand awareness.

Taken together, the inner model results demonstrate that buzz marketing and viral marketing alone were not sufficient to significantly influence brand awareness, while K-popfication emerged as the most dominant and significant driver. This finding highlights the importance of cultural relevance in marketing strategies aimed at Gen Z, who are more responsive to identity-based and emotionally engaging content compared to traditional or purely digital strategies. It also supports the Hierarchy of Effects Theory, where communication stimuli that are emotionally and culturally meaningful serve as the most effective triggers for the awareness stage, laying the foundation for subsequent consumer attitudes and behaviors.

Implications. The findings of this study provide theoretical implications for the development of marketing communication literature in the MSME context. The strong effect of K-popfication confirms the argument of Kim and Kim (2020) and Park and Lin (2020) that cultural symbols have a significant role in shaping consumer-brand relationships. This also extends the application of the Hierarchy of Effects Theory, as it shows that awareness can be effectively built through cultural and identity-based stimuli rather than relying solely on traditional or functional marketing approaches. Moreover, the limited influence of buzz marketing and viral marketing in this study suggests that such strategies may not be universally effective unless they are creatively integrated with cultural narratives that resonate with Gen Z (Sasmita & Suki, 2020; Hutter et al., 2021).

From a practical perspective, the results emphasize the importance for MSMEs to incorporate cultural adaptation into their branding strategies. Gen Z consumers, as digital natives, are constantly exposed to diverse stimuli, and only marketing efforts that align with their cultural identities are likely to capture attention and drive awareness. For MSMEs with limited resources, this implies that investment in culturally relevant strategies, such as collaborations with fan communities or the adoption of visual and stylistic elements from K-pop, may generate higher returns compared to traditional buzz or viral marketing campaigns. These findings align with Choi and Lee (2020), who argued that viral effects are only impactful when content strongly reflects the values and interests of the target audience. Thus, the integration of digital strategies with cultural content can serve as a sustainable pathway for MSMEs to build consumer awareness and compete in the increasingly globalized marketplace.

CONCLUSION & SUGGESTION

The findings of this research conclude that not all marketing strategies examined have the same impact on brand awareness among Generation Z consumers of MSME products. Buzz marketing was found to have no significant influence, suggesting that word-of-mouth strategies alone are insufficient to shape consumer awareness in today's digital and competitive environment. Viral marketing showed a positive but insignificant influence, which indicates that the effectiveness of viral campaigns depends strongly on the creativity, authenticity, and cultural relevance of the content being disseminated. In contrast, K-popfication demonstrated a strong and significant effect on brand awareness, confirming that the integration of cultural elements, particularly K-pop, is a powerful driver of emotional attachment and brand recall for Gen Z consumers. Collectively, buzz marketing, viral marketing, and K-popfication were able to explain 69% of the variance in brand awareness, showing that the combination of digital strategies and cultural adaptation provides a robust explanatory model for MSME branding.

The implications of these findings highlight that MSMEs need to carefully design their marketing communication strategies by moving beyond conventional buzz or viral approaches and incorporating cultural adaptation that resonates with young consumers. From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches the literature on digital marketing communication by demonstrating that cultural factors play a central role in the awareness stage of the Hierarchy of Effects Theory. Future research is encouraged to extend the scope to other cultural phenomena beyond K-pop, or to test similar models in different consumer segments, in order to broaden understanding of the interaction between culture and marketing strategies. From a practical perspective, MSMEs are advised to collaborate with youth communities, adopt K-pop-inspired themes, and design emotionally engaging campaigns that are aligned with Gen Z's digital lifestyle. Finally, for policymakers and stakeholders, there is a need to provide support programs and training that enable MSMEs to adopt culturally relevant digital marketing strategies, thereby strengthening the competitiveness of local products in both domestic and international markets.

This research is not without limitations. The use of purposive sampling with 153 respondents limits the generalizability of the findings to wider populations beyond Generation Z consumers of MSME products. The study was also focused on specific marketing variables—buzz marketing, viral marketing, and K-popfication—so other potentially relevant factors such as influencer marketing, user-generated content, or brand trust were not examined. Future research could address these limitations by expanding the sample size, including more diverse demographic groups, and testing additional variables that may interact with cultural adaptation and digital marketing strategies. In doing so, subsequent studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how MSMEs can effectively build brand awareness in the digital economy.

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