

Amplifying the Customer Voice: Unleashing the Power of Influencer Partnerships and Co-creation to Drive Viral Growth

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Abstract

The escalating prominence of social media trends within micro and small enterprise (MSEs) marketing strategies has prompted this research. Its primary objective is to scrutinize the influence of influencer marketing and co-creation on MSEs' marketing performance, with viral marketing serving as a mediating factor. A survey involving 214 MSEs, utilizing a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire, yielded the data for this study. Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) through Warp-PLS version 8.0. The findings reveal that both influencer marketing and co-creation effectively stimulate viral marketing. Consequently, influencer marketing's contribution to marketing performance is realized solely through its impact on viral marketing. In contrast, co-creation exhibits a more pronounced direct influence on marketing performance compared to its mediated effect through viral marketing. These results contribute to the understanding of the appropriate application of social media trends within MSEs operating in urban areas of South Sulawesi, Indonesia.

Keywords: *Influencer, Co-Creation, Viral Marketing, Marketing Performance, MSEs'*

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary digital landscape is characterized by the ascendance of consumers as active agents in constructing brand identities and reputations (Nicolaou, 2022). No longer passive recipients of corporate messaging, consumers have emerged as prolific content generators within social media ecosystems (Malodia et al., 2024). The consequent amplification of consumer voices (Edinger-Schons et al., 2020) has introduced novel opportunities and complexities for brands endeavoring to cultivate and maintain positive brand perceptions and consumer relationships (Nicolaou, 2022).

Digital influencers have emerged as pivotal figures in amplifying consumer voices (Edinger-Schons et al., 2020; Erwin et al., 2022), leveraging their ability to cultivate trust and shape audience decisions (Nicolaou, 2022; Malodia et al., 2024). Possessing dedicated and authentic followings, influencers exert significant influence in marketing campaigns (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). Their capacity to expedite message dissemination and generate product or service buzz is undeniable (Rathod, 2022). Nevertheless, the efficacy of influencer marketing hinges upon the congruence between the brand and the influencer's persona (Belanche et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the concept of co-creation has emerged as a compelling strategy for fostering deeper consumer engagement in marketing endeavors (Haverila et al., 2022). By inviting consumers to collaboratively develop content, co-creation not only amplifies their involvement but also cultivates a sense of ownership towards the brand (Sarkar & Banerjee, 2021; Shoukat & Ramkissoon, 2022). This practice has the potential to enhance the authenticity of marketing messages and strengthen the emotional bond between consumers and the brand (Sarkar & Banerjee, 2021). Nevertheless, the optimal integration of co-creation within viral marketing campaigns remains an area requiring further investigation (Haverila et al., 2022).

Leveraging the rapid dissemination capabilities of social media, viral marketing has emerged as a potent tool for enhancing brand visibility (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). The convergence of influencer marketing and

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co-creation within viral campaigns offers promising prospects for amplified impact (Rathod, 2022; Haverila et al., 2022). Nevertheless, empirical investigations into the synergistic interplay of these elements remain scarce (Çakirkaya & Aytac Afşar, 2024). A more profound comprehension of this dynamic is imperative for the formulation of optimized strategic approaches.

Despite a burgeoning body of research examining the roles of influencers and the significance of co-creation in digital marketing (Haverila et al., 2022; Barile et al., 2024), a comprehensive understanding of how these two constructs synergistically enhance viral campaign efficacy remains elusive (Sarkar & Banerjee, 2021; Rathod, 2022; Çakirkaya & Aytac Afşar, 2024). While numerous studies have delved into the individual roles of influencers (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021) and co-creation (Shoukat & Ramkissoon, 2022; Barile et al., 2024) in digital marketing, a paucity of research exists that holistically investigates their interplay in the context of viral campaigns (Erwin et al., 2023; Çakirkaya & Aytac Afşar, 2024). Furthermore, the literature is notably deficient in exploring how specific influencer attributes and co-creation modalities influence consumer perceptions and, consequently, purchase decisions (Sarkar & Banerjee, 2021; Rathod, 2022; Çakirkaya & Aytac Afşar, 2024).

This study endeavors to bridge a significant gap in the existing literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the pivotal roles of influencers and co-creation in viral marketing campaigns. Employing a blend of theoretical and empirical approaches, this research will delve into the mechanisms by which the synergy between influencer marketing and co-creation can amplify consumer voice and drive business growth.

This investigation aspires to make a notable contribution to the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of digital marketing. Furthermore, the findings of this study are anticipated to provide actionable insights for marketing practitioners to develop campaigns that effectively leverage consumer sentiment. Consequently, this research aims to not only enrich the theoretical underpinnings of the field but also offer practical applications for industry professionals.

METHODOLOGY SECTION

Respondent

The present study population comprised micro and small enterprises (SMEs) within the South Sulawesi Province that had leveraged social media platforms and influencer partnerships for product promotion. From an initial pool of 240 potential participants, a final sample of 214 UMK met the inclusion criteria, yielding a response rate of 89.17%. Sample size determination adhered to the guidelines proposed by Anderson & Gerbing (1988) and Kline (2011), recommending a minimum of 150 and 200 participants, respectively, for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis. To ensure model robustness, a ratio of at least five cases per parameter was maintained, aligning with Kline's (2011) suggestion. Moreover, the sample size was consistent with Ferdinand's (2006) recommendation of 100-200 participants for SEM studies. The research encompassed a diverse range of SMEs, classified by business type, geographic location across three cities (Makassar, Pare-pare, and Palopo), and operational duration. Data collection was conducted between February and June 2024.

Measurement

A questionnaire was utilized as the principal data collection method in this research. Responses were captured on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 representing strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement. Each item within the questionnaire was meticulously constructed to align with the operational definitions of the study variables. Specifically, influencer and co-creation were operationalized as independent variables, viral marketing as a mediating variable, and marketing performance as the dependent variable. Building upon the foundational work of Glucksman (2017), Ki & Kim (2019), and Erwin et al. (2023), the operationalization of the influencer variable was informed by indicators adapted from their respective studies. Similarly, the construct of co-creation was operationalized through indicators derived from the research of Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004), Ranjan & Read (2016), and Maupa et al. (2024). Indicators for the viral marketing variable were adapted from Puriwat & Tripopsakul (2021) and Erwin et al. (2023), while those for marketing

performance were based on the findings of Varadarajan (2020), Propheto et al. (2020), and Khalayleh & Al-Hawary (2022).

Analysis

A Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach was adopted for this study. This methodological choice was underpinned by the non-normal distribution of the collected data, a characteristic well-documented in the literature (Nadkarni & Gupta, 2007). Given its predilection for predictive modeling and robust performance with non-normal datasets, PLS-SEM was deemed optimally suited to the research objectives. Data processing and analysis were executed using WarpPLS Version 8.

RESULTS

Subsequent to data processing via WarpPLS Version 8, the resultant model fit and quality metrics are presented in Table 1:

Table 1 Model Fit

Goodness of Fit Indicators	Requirement	Results
Average path coefficient (APC)	P<0,05	0.275, P<0.001
Average R-squared (ARS)	P<0,05	0.375, P<0.001
Average adjusted R-squared (AARS)	P<0,05	0.368, P<0.001
Average block VIF (AVIF)	acceptable if <= 5, ideally <= 3.3	1.579
Average full collinearity VIF (AFVIF)	acceptable if <= 5, ideally <= 3.3	1.646
Tenenhaus GoF (GoF)	small >= 0.1, medium >= 0.25, large >= 0.36	0.480
Simpson's paradox ratio (SPR)	acceptable if >= 0.7, ideally = 1	0.800
R-squared contribution ratio (RSCR)	acceptable if >= 0.9, ideally = 1	0.994
Statistical suppression ratio (SSR)	acceptable if >= 0.7	1.000
Nonlinear bivariate causality direction ratio (NLBCDR)	acceptable if >= 0.7	1.000

(as evinced by the researchers' meticulous data processing, 2024)

The proposed research model has thus been demonstrated to be suitable for subsequent analysis.

Following the construction of the research instrument, a rigorous assessment of validity and reliability was undertaken. Validity, defined as the extent to which an instrument measures the intended construct, was established through convergent and discriminant validity analyses (Hair et al., 2017). Convergent validity was evaluated by examining loading factor values and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) scores. Consistent with Hulland (1999), a loading factor threshold of ≥ 0.70 was applied, with all items in the current study exceeding this criterion (Table 2). Moreover, AVE values for each construct surpassed the recommended threshold of ≥ 0.5 (Hair et al., 2017), providing further evidence of convergent validity (Table 2). Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the square root of each construct's AVE to its correlations with other constructs. As stipulated by Hair et al. (2017), the former should exceed the latter, a condition met in the present study (Table 2), thereby confirming the instrument's discriminant validity.

Table 2. Validity and Reliability Testing

Variables and Indicators	Loading Factor	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
Influencer (INF)		0.597	0.887	0.912
INF1	(0.749)			
INF2	(0.850)			

INF3	(0.768)			
INF4	(0.766)			
INF5	(0.754)			
INF6	(0.723)			
INF7	(0.794)			
Co-Creation (CC)		0.561	0.869	0.899
CC1	(0.738)			
CC2	(0.813)			
CC3	(0.720)			
CC4	(0.735)			
CC5	(0.732)			
CC6	(0.738)			
CC7	(0.760)			
Viral Marketing (VM)		0.628	0.900	0.922
VM1	(0.866)			
VM2	(0.757)			
VM3	(0.707)			
VM4	(0.866)			
VM5	(0.769)			
VM6	(0.779)			
VM7	(0.789)			
Marketing Performance (MP)		0.667	0.916	0.933
MP1	(0.823)			
MP2	(0.821)			
MP3	(0.815)			
MP4	(0.842)			
MP5	(0.713)			
MP6	(0.854)			
MP7	(0.842)			

(as evinced by the researchers' meticulous data processing, 2024)

After data collection, the construct reliability of the measurement model was assessed through an examination of internal consistency. Cronbach's Alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR) coefficients were computed for this purpose. As stipulated by Hair et al. (2017), a threshold value of ≥ 0.60 is considered acceptable for both indices. The empirical results presented in Table 3 confirm that the current study achieved the requisite level of reliability for all constructs. Structural equation modeling (SEM) using WarpPLS version 8 was employed to evaluate the hypothesized relationships. Path coefficients (β) were examined to determine the direction and magnitude of the effects among the constructs, with positive and negative values indicating corresponding influences. Moreover, the significance of these relationships was assessed using the p-value, wherein a value less than 0.05 signifies a statistically significant effect, while a value greater than 0.05 implies a non-significant relationship (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 3. Determinant Validity

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
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Influencer (1)	(0.773)	0.488	0.651	0.336
Co-Creation (2)	0.488	(0.749)	0.448	0.352
Viral Marketing (3)	0.651	0.448	(0.792)	0.451
Marketing Performance (4)	0.336	0.352	0.451	(0.817)

(as evinced by the researchers' meticulous data processing, 2024)

Seven hypotheses (H1-H7) were formulated for this study. Of these, two directly examined the influence of independent variables on the dependent variable: H1 and H2. While H1 was rejected, indicating a non-significant negative influence of influencer marketing on marketing performance ($\beta = -0.012$, $p = 0.429$), H2 was supported, demonstrating a significant positive impact of co-creation on marketing performance ($\beta = 0.254$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, the mediating variable (viral marketing) on the dependent variable, as posited in H3, was also supported, exhibiting a significant positive relationship ($\beta = 0.375$, $p < 0.001$). The remaining hypotheses, H4 and H5, which examined the influence of independent variables on the mediating variable, were likewise supported. Specifically, H4 ($\beta = 0.585$, $p < 0.001$) indicated a significant positive influence of influencer marketing on viral marketing, while H5 ($\beta = 0.151$, $p = 0.012$) revealed a significant positive influence of co-creation on viral marketing, albeit to a lesser extent than influencer marketing (Table 4).

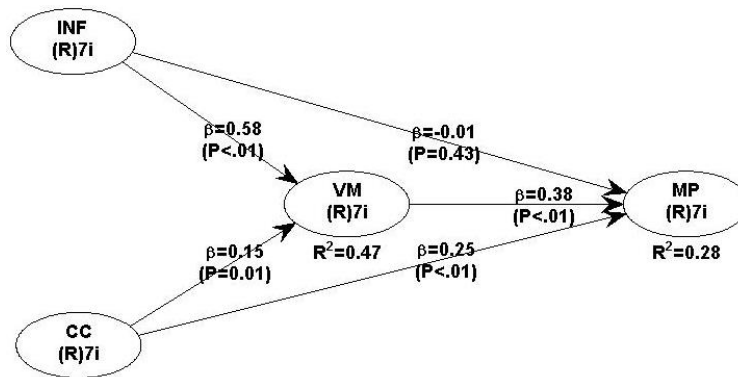


Figure 1. Results of Researcher Data Processing

Hypotheses H6 and H7 posited that viral marketing would mediate the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable. The hypothesis test results revealed that viral marketing effectively mediated the influence of influencers on marketing performance (H6 supported, $\beta = 0.219$, $p < 0.001$), indicating full mediation. Conversely, viral campaigns failed to mediate the influence of co-creation on marketing performance (H7 rejected, $\beta = 0.057$, $p = 0.119$). These findings suggest that while viral marketing is a necessary mediator in the influencer-marketing performance relationship, co-creation exerts a direct influence on marketing performance, independent of viral marketing (Table 4).

Tabel 4. Hypothesis and Results

Hypothesis	Results
H1 = Influencers significantly contribute to enhanced marketing performance	($\beta = -0.012$, $p = 0.429$) H1 Rejected
H2 = Co-creation significantly contribute to enhanced marketing performance	($\beta = 0.254$, $p < 0.001$) H2 Supported
H3 = Viral marketing significantly contribute to enhanced marketing performance	($\beta = 0.375$, $p < 0.001$) H3 Supported
H4 = Influencers significantly contribute to enhanced viral marketing	($\beta = 0.585$, $p < 0.001$) H4 Supported
H5 = Co-creation significantly contribute to enhanced viral marketing	($\beta = 0.151$, $p = 0.012$) H5 Supported
H6: Viral marketing serves as a mediator between influencer and its effects on marketing performance.	($\beta = 0.219$, $p < 0.001$) H6 Supported

H7: Viral marketing serves as a mediator between co-creation and its effects on marketing performance.	$(\beta=0.057, p=0.119)$	H7 Rejected
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(as evinced by the researchers' meticulous data processing, 2024)

DISCUSSION

Social media trends have revolutionized the digital marketing landscape, presenting novel opportunities to foster engagement and bolster brand awareness (Nicolaou, 2022; Erwin et al., 2023). Collaborations with influencers (Erwin et al., 2022), who wield significant influence over their audiences (Maupa et al., 2024), have emerged as a prevalent strategy for reaching broader target markets (Chopra et al., 2021). Moreover, co-creation approaches, which involve consumers in product development or campaign design (Roberts et al., 2022), have gained traction (Jain et al., 2024), enabling companies to forge deeper connections with customers (Ardley et al., 2020; Appiah et al., 2021). Viral marketing, characterized by its rapid digital word-of-mouth dissemination, also plays a pivotal role in amplifying the efficacy of these marketing strategies (Putra & Erwin, 2023; Maupa et al., 2024). The confluence of these elements empowers companies to craft more pertinent, authentic, and impactful marketing campaigns (Salfin et al., 2024).

While influencer collaborations are frequently touted as a potent strategy for enhancing the marketing performance of Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs), empirical evidence suggests that this approach does not always yield substantial returns (Kim & Kim, 2021; Ye et al., 2021). This phenomenon can be attributed to several factors (Ye et al., 2021), including a misalignment between the influencer's image and the MSEs' brand values (Kim & Kim, 2021; Ye et al., 2021), the subpar quality of the generated content (Leung et al., 2022), or a lack of audience engagement (Erwin et al., 2023). Moreover, the considerable costs associated with hiring influencers may pose a significant barrier for resource-constrained MSEs (Leung et al., 2022). Consequently, MSEs should conduct a thorough evaluation before embarking on influencer partnerships and explore alternative digital marketing strategies that better align with their specific circumstances and resource capabilities.

Findings from this study indicate that co-creation strategies exert a substantial positive influence on the marketing performance of MSEs. By actively engaging consumers in the co-design of products or services (Haverila et al., 2022), MSEs are positioned to deliver offerings that resonate more deeply with customer needs and aspirations (Ardley et al., 2020; Sarkar & Banerjee, 2021; Shoukat & Ramkissoon, 2022). Consequently, this approach not only augments customer satisfaction but also cultivates brand loyalty and generates positive word-of-mouth (Appiah et al., 2021; Haverila et al., 2022). Moreover, co-creation facilitates MSEs' ability to identify nascent market trends and garner invaluable insights for product refinement (Sarkar & Banerjee, 2021). As such, co-creation represents a strategic, long-term investment in cultivating enduring customer relationships and fortifying MSEs' competitive edge in dynamic markets (Appiah et al., 2021; Maupa et al., 2024).

Viral marketing has proven to be an exceptionally effective strategy for MSEs aiming to enhance their market impact. By exploiting the exponential reach of social networks and digital platforms (Erwin et al., 2023), MSEs can achieve significant gains in market penetration at a fraction of the cost associated with traditional marketing channels. The viral nature of successful content can stimulate a cascade of positive outcomes, including increased brand recognition (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021), higher website traffic (Krishnan et al., 2022), and ultimately, improved engagement and sales (Erwin et al., 2023). Moreover, viral marketing can contribute to the cultivation of a positive brand image (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021) and the strengthening of consumer trust (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021; Krishnan et al., 2022). In essence, viral marketing can serve as a catalyst for growth for MSEs, particularly in the context of today's highly competitive digital marketplace (Çakirkaya & Aytac Afşar, 2024).

This research further demonstrates that influencers play a pivotal role in fostering viral marketing within the context of MSEs (Rathod, 2022). Influencers with dedicated and pertinent follower bases can exponentially propagate marketing communications (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021; Erwin et al., 2022). Endorsements from authoritative influencers can bolster consumer confidence in MSEs' offerings, thereby stimulating positive word-of-mouth marketing (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021; Rathod, 2022). Additionally, the creative content co-produced with influencers is often more captivating and memorable for the audience (Zhou et al., 2021), thus increasing the propensity for widespread social media dissemination (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021; Leung et al., 2022). As such, influencers can act as potent catalysts in expediting the dissemination of MSEs' marketing messages and expanding their reach (Belanche et al., 2021).

The findings reveal a robust positive correlation between the implementation of co-creation strategies and the success of viral marketing among micro and small enterprises (MSEs). By actively engaging consumers in the product development or campaign creation process (Sarkar & Banerjee, 2021), businesses can produce content that is both highly relevant and authentic (Font et al., 2021), thus facilitating viral dissemination (Erwin et al., 2023). Moreover, consumer participation in co-creation tends to foster a stronger sense of ownership and loyalty towards the product or brand (Ardley et al., 2020; Haverila et al., 2022), consequently motivating them to voluntarily promote it within their social networks (Appiah et al., 2021; Font et al., 2021). These results substantiate the assertion that co-creation can serve as a potent tool for MSEs to enhance brand visibility and expedite business growth (Sarkar & Banerjee, 2021; Shoukat & Ramkissoon, 2022).

This research demonstrates that viral marketing serves as an effective mediator in amplifying the impact of influencer endorsements on the marketing performance of Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs). When influencers promote MSEs' products or services (Leung et al., 2022) and the content goes viral (Rathod, 2022), there is a substantial increase in brand awareness (Leung et al., 2022), consumer engagement (Erwin et al., 2023), and consequently (Leung et al., 2022), sales (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021; Leung et al., 2022). This suggests that viral marketing not only reinforces the influence of influencers but also catalyzes the attainment of MSEs' marketing objectives (Nicolaou, 2022; Erwin et al., 2023).

In contrast to its efficacy in amplifying influencer impact, viral marketing demonstrates a less pronounced role in mediating the effects of co-creation on MSE marketing outcomes. While co-creation possesses the potential to enhance marketing performance through fostering deeper customer engagement and loyalty (Sarkar & Banerjee, 2021, Erwin et al., 2023), the findings indicate that the viral diffusion mechanism is insufficient to robustly connect these co-creative efforts with tangible marketing results within the MSE context. This discrepancy may be attributed to a confluence of factors, including resource limitations hindering effective viral campaign management (Tavasoli et al., 2021; Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021), a dearth of awareness regarding viral marketing's strategic importance among MSEs (Hosseinikhah Choshaly & Mirabolghasemi, 2022; Malodia et al., 2022), or the inherent challenges in aligning certain MSE offerings with the demands of viral dissemination (Robles et al., 2020; Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021; Hosseinikhah Choshaly & Mirabolghasemi, 2022; Maupa et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

The study's findings underscore the profound influence of social media dynamics on the marketing strategies of Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs). Influencer partnerships, collaborative creation initiatives, and viral content dissemination have emerged as pivotal components in amplifying brand visibility, fostering customer connections, and optimizing overall marketing outcomes. However, the research also indicates that viral marketing may not be a decisive intermediary in translating the benefits of co-creation into enhanced marketing performance for MSEs. Resource constraints, limited awareness of viral marketing tactics, and the specific characteristics of MSEs' offerings might account for this attenuated relationship. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of these factors and devise alternative approaches, further investigation is imperative.

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