





# Digital Marketing Strategy for Gen-Z: A Mathematical Modelling Approach on the Impact of Influencer Marketing and Customer Experience on Skincare Purchase Decision

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## ABSTRACT

Generation Z is a digital consumer group that has a significant influence on market direction, especially in the beauty and skincare industry. Their characteristics of being closely connected to social media, responsive to trends, and having a preference for social values and personalization, demand more adaptive marketing strategies. Influencer marketing and customer experience are two strategies frequently used to reach this group. However, the relative effectiveness of each strategy remains an open question, especially in a local context such as Medan City. Therefore, this study is important to provide a data-based understanding of the influence of these two factors on skincare purchasing decisions, while identifying the most dominant variables. This study aims to: (1) analyze the influence of influencer marketing on skincare purchasing decisions among Generation Z in Medan City; (2) analyze the influence of customer experience on purchasing decisions; and (3) examine the dominant factors that influence these decisions. The method used is a quantitative approach with a purposive sampling technique, through the distribution of closed questionnaires. The collected data will be analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) based on Partial Least Squares (PLS) with the help of SmartPLS software because the variables studied are latent variables. The research results can be concluded that: (a) Influencer marketing has been shown to have a significant influence on skincare purchases among Gen-Z, and (b) Customer experience also has a significant influence on purchasing decisions.

**Keywords:** Digital Marketing, Gen-Z, Influencer Marketing, Customer Experience, Skincare Purchases

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of rapidly evolving digital marketing, Generation Z has emerged as the most dynamic and strategic consumer segment. According to Statistics (2023), more than 78% of Gen-Z consumers in Indonesia rely on social media as a primary reference before making purchases, particularly in lifestyle and personal care product categories, such as skincare. This generation exhibits unique characteristics: they are constantly connected through digital platforms, highly responsive to trends and social figures, and are more influenced by personal experiences than traditional promotions. In this context, two dominant marketing approaches have emerged: influencer marketing and customer experience. Influencer marketing relies on the credibility and social familiarity of certain figures trusted by Gen-Z to shape brand perceptions and drive purchase intention. Meanwhile, customer experience encompasses the entire emotional and functional interaction of consumers with a product or service, from pre-purchase to post-purchase. While both approaches have been widely used by businesses, their relative effectiveness and dominant contribution remain academically unexplored especially in a local market environment like Medan, which has its own unique consumption culture dynamics. The question that arises is: do influencer marketing and customer experience truly influence skincare product purchasing decisions among Gen-Z? And if so, which factors have the most dominant influence? To answer these questions, this study will use a quantitative approach based on Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-PLS) to examine the relationships between variables simultaneously and partially for latent variables.

The urgency of this research lies not only in the theoretical gaps in the literature on local digital consumer behavior, but also in the practical needs of business actors and MSMEs to develop relevant, data-driven, and targeted marketing strategies for the Gen-Z segment, which is increasingly determining the direction of the market in today's digital era.

Research on Generation Z purchasing behavior continues to evolve along with digital transformation and shifts in consumer behavior. One of the main focuses in recent literature is the influence of influencer marketing and customer experience on purchasing decisions, especially in lifestyle sectors such as skincare. Meta-analyses conducted by Wang et al. [1] and Lindiasari et al. [2] show that marketing through public figures has a significant effect on brand perceptions and purchase intentions of young consumers. Other studies support that Gen-Z's distinctive characteristics, such as the need for personalization, digital connectedness, and emotional values, make them responsive to experience-based approaches [1], [3], [4]. Research by Azemi et al. [5] and Zhan et al. [6] also highlights the role of psychological factors such as Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and trust in digital platforms in shaping Gen-Z purchasing decisions. Meanwhile, Liu et al. [3] and Zhang et al. [7] emphasize the importance of interactivity and social engagement in digital spaces such as the metaverse and eWOM 2.0, which expand the scope of the customer journey virtually. On the other hand, technology-based approaches such as the use of in-store AI [8], augmented reality [9], and IoT [10] have been shown to increase perceived service quality and customer loyalty, including in the Gen-Z segment that prioritizes digitally integrated experiences.

Several recent studies have even highlighted the intersection between sustainability and Gen-Z digital preferences. Paetz et al. [8] and Rahman et al. [9] explain the gap between Gen-Z attitudes and behaviors regarding sustainable consumption, which can be bridged through value-based digital strategies. In the context of social media, platforms such as TikTok have proven effective in influencing young consumers' perceptions and choices of products and services [11]. Meanwhile, personalized digital advertising, smart brand loyalty, and emotionally tailored content are important aspects in creating meaningful customer experiences [4], [12], [13], [14].

While these studies have significantly contributed to understanding Gen-Z behavior, most still examine variables separately or in a foreign context. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by simultaneously integrating influencer marketing and customer experience into a single model of Gen-Z purchasing behavior based on local data, using a comprehensive Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM–PLS) approach.

The objectives of this study include: (1) Analyzing the influence of influencer marketing on skincare purchasing decisions among Gen-Z, (2) Analyzing the influence of customer experience on skincare purchasing decisions among Gen-Z, and (3) Providing recommendations for effective digital marketing strategies for the skincare industry.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1 Characteristics Gen-Z

They are active on social media, prefer visual content, and place greater trust in reviews from online communities. They are sensitive to trends and brand transparency, and tend to make impulsive purchases based on digital information.

### 2.2 Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is a promotional strategy that uses public figures or content creators to influence an audience. Key factors include credibility, authenticity, and emotional connection with followers. Social Influence Theory explains that individuals tend to imitate the behavior of those they perceive as influential.

### 2.3 Customer Experience

According to Meyer & Schwager (2007), customer experience is the result of a customer's interaction with a brand throughout the customer journey. Its main dimensions include: Ease of Access, Digital Services, Post-Purchase Satisfaction, and Interaction Quality.

### 2.4 Buying Decision

Kotler & Keller (2016) explain that purchasing decisions are a process that includes recognizing needs, searching for information, evaluating alternatives, purchasing decisions, and post-purchase behavior.

### 2.5 Research Type & Framework

Quantitative with an explanatory research approach. The population in this study is Gen-Z in Medan City who actively use social media and have purchased skincare. The research sample was 150 respondents, using a purposive sampling technique. The research instrument used a Likert scale questionnaire (1–5). Data analysis in this study includes: Validity & reliability tests, multiple linear regression, as well as t-tests and F-tests to test the hypothesis. The structural equation model is mathematically expressed as:

$$Y = \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

Where:

Y = Purchase Decision

$X_1$  = Influencer Marketing

$X_2$  = Customer Experience

$\beta_1, \beta_2$  =

$\varepsilon$  = Error Term

Dengan:  $X_1$  = Influencer Marketing,  $X_2$  = Customer Experience Y = Purchase Decision

## 2.6 Validity And Reliability Testing

Convergent validity is measured using Average Variance Extracted (AVE):

$$AVE = \frac{\sum \lambda_i^2}{\sum \lambda_i^2 + \sum \theta_i} \quad (2)$$

Where  $\lambda_i^2$  = factor loading,  $\theta_i$  = error variance

Reliability is measured by Composite Reliability (CR)

$$CR = \frac{(\sum \lambda_i)^2}{(\sum \lambda_i)^2 + \sum \theta_i} \quad (3)$$

Cronbach's Alpha is used to ensure internal consistency:

$$\alpha = \frac{k}{k-1} \left(1 - \frac{\sum \sigma_i^2}{\sigma_t^2}\right) \quad (4)$$

Where k = number of items,  $\sigma_i^2$  = variance of each item,  $\sigma_t^2$  = total variance.

## 2.7 Goodness of Fit of Sem-Pls

The explanatory power of the model:

$$R^2 = 1 - \frac{\sum (y_i - \hat{y}_i)^2}{\sum (y_i - \bar{y})^2} \quad (5)$$

Predictive relevance is represented by  $Q^2$ :

$$Q^2 = 1 - \prod (1 - R_i^2) \quad (6)$$

Path significance is tested with t-statistic:

$$t = \frac{\hat{\beta}}{SE(\hat{\beta})} \quad (7)$$

## 2.8 Budget Realization Model

Financial realization is modelled as:

$$R = \frac{\text{Money Realization}}{\text{Money Total}} \times 100\% \quad (8)$$

From financial report:

$$R = \frac{23.704.000}{29.630.000} \times 100\% = 80\%$$

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study collected responses from 150 Generation Z consumers in Medan. After data cleaning, 118 valid responses were used for further analysis.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Gender and Age in Relation to Frequency of Skincare Use

Age (Years)	Frequency of Skincare Use	Gender		Amount
		Man	Woman	
<17	1-2 times	1.00%	1.00%	1.00%
	Every day	1.00%	3.00%	3.00%
	Total	1.00%	3.00%	5.00%
17-20	1-2 times	10.00%	3.00%	13.00%
	3-4 times	4.00%	4.00%	8.00%
	5-6 times	1.00%	1.00%	2.00%
	Every day	3.00%	25.00%	27.00%
	every night	1.00%	0.00%	1.00%
	Total	18.00%	33.00%	51.00%
21-24	1-2 times	5.00%	7.00%	13.00%
	3-4 times	3.00%	3.00%	6.00%
	5-6 times	1.00%	0.00%	1.00%
	Every day	1.00%	22.00%	23.00%
25-27	Total	11.00%	32.00%	43.00%
	3-4 times	1.00%	0.00%	1.00%
	Total	1.00%	0.00%	1.00%

Age (Years)	Frequency of Skincare Use	Gender		Amount
		Man	Woman	
25–28	1–2 times	1.00%	0.00%	1.00%
	Total	1.00%	0.00%	1.00%
Grand Total		32.00%	68.00%	100.00%

From the results of Table 1, Respondents consisted of 68% female and 32% male, with the majority aged between 17–24 years. Most respondents reported using skincare products regularly, with female respondents dominating daily use. This confirms that skincare is an integral part of Gen-Z lifestyle, particularly among women.

**Table 2.** Characteristics of Age Type and social media (In Percentage)

Age (Years)	Social media					Amount
	Insta gram	Tik Tok	Twitter/X	Whats App	You Tube	
<17	1.33%	3.33%				4.67%
17–20	25.33%	23.33%		0.67%	1.33%	50.67%
21–24	18.00%	24.67%	0.67%			43.33%
25–27	0.67%		0.00%			0.67%
25–28		0.67%				0.67%
Amount	45.33%	52.00%	0.67%	0.67%	1.33%	100.00%

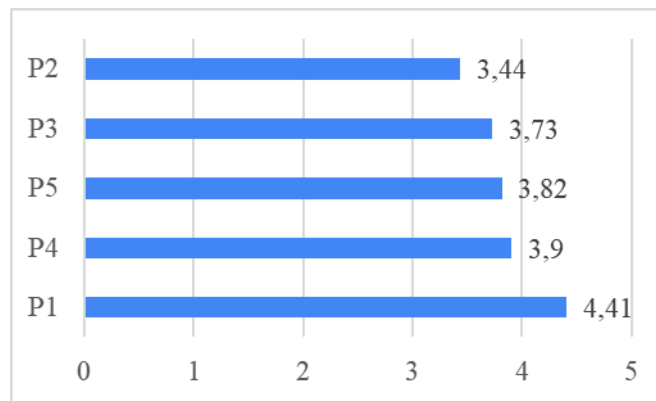
From the results of Table 2, In terms of digital habits, respondents were highly active on social media, especially TikTok (52%) and Instagram (45.33%), followed by YouTube and WhatsApp. This finding reinforces the importance of these platforms as the main channels for digital marketing targeting Gen-Z. Descriptive statistics indicated that the constructs were rated positively:

**3.1 Influencer Marketing**

Influencer marketing is a digital marketing strategy that leverages the credibility, attractiveness, and expertise of individuals with significant social media presence to promote products or services. Influencers act as opinion leaders whose endorsements shape consumer perceptions, attitudes, and purchase intentions, particularly among younger generations who are highly engaged in online platforms. This suggests that Gen-Z actively responds to product endorsements from influencers they follow.

**Table 3.** Characteristics of Influencer Marketing

Indicator	Choice					Average Score	Category
	1	2	3	4	5		
P1	0	0	14	61	75	4.41	Very high
P2	0	7	87	39	17	3.44	Tall
P3	0	2	60	65	23	3.73	Tall
P4	0	4	38	77	31	3.9	Tall
P5	0	7	49	58	36	3.82	Tall



**Figure 1.** Answer from the Influencer Marketing Variables

Where:

- p1 Influencers promote skincare products on social media
- p2 Trust skincare recommendations from influencers
- p3 Influencers have credibility in choosing skincare products
- p4 Influencer communication style influences skincare purchasing decisions

### P5 Interest in buying skincare because of seeing the results shown by influencers

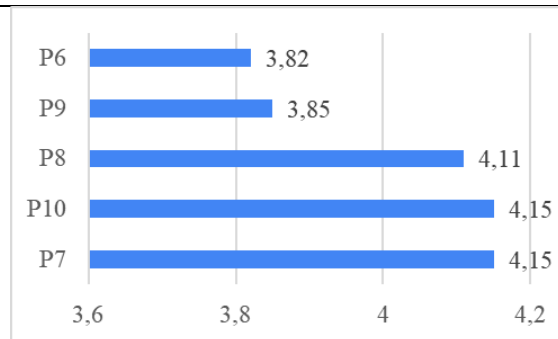
From the results of Table 3.3 and Figure 3.1, it can be seen that the P1 indicator with the highest value is Influencers promoting skincare on social media with an average score (4.41) in the very high category. Indicator P4 Influencer communication style influences decisions in purchasing skincare with an average score (3.9) in the high category. Indicator P5 Interest in purchasing skincare because of seeing the results shown by influencers with an average score (3.82) in the high category. Indicator P3 Influencers have credibility in choosing skincare products with an average score (3.73) in the high category. Indicator P2 Trust in skincare recommendations from influencers with an average score (3.44) in the high category. This means that Influencer Marketing is quite good for skincare products.

### 3.2 Customer Experience

Customer experience refers to the overall perception, emotions, and responses of consumers resulting from their interactions with a brand across various touchpoints. It encompasses ease of access to information, interactivity, service responsiveness, transaction convenience, and post-purchase satisfaction. A positive customer experience fosters trust, loyalty, and long-term consumer relationships. This indicates that digital interaction quality strongly shapes their purchase decision.

**Table 4.** Characteristics of Customer Experience

Indicator	Choice					Average Score	Category
	1	2	3	4	5		
P6	0	4	45	75	26	3.82	Tall
P7	0	1	27	70	52	4.15	Tall
P8	0	1	30	71	48	4.11	Tall
P9	0	1	51	67	31	3.85	Tall
P10	0	1	27	70	52	4.15	Tall



**Figure 2.** Answer from the Customer Experience Variables

Where:

- P6 Feeling satisfied with the experience of shopping for skincare online
- P7 Website / application where you can buy skincare easily
- P8 Get clear information about the product before purchasing
- P9 The delivery process for the purchased skincare products is very satisfying.
- P10 The feeling of joy when receiving the ordered skincare products

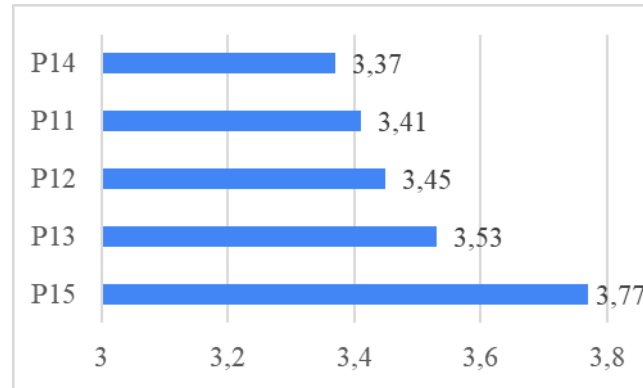
From the results of Table 4 and Figure 2, it can be seen that indicators P7 and P10 are Website/application where to buy skincare is easy to use and feeling happy when receiving the purchased skincare product is very satisfying with an average score (4.15) in the high category. Indicator P8 Getting clear information about the product before purchasing with an average score (4.11) in the high category. Indicator P9 the process of sending the purchased skincare product is very satisfying with an average score (3.85) in the high category. Indicator P6 Feeling satisfied with the experience of shopping for skincare online with an average score (3.82) in the high category. This means that Customer Experience is quite good for skincare products.

### 3.3 Purchase Decision

Purchase decision is the process by which consumers evaluate alternatives and choose a specific product or service to fulfill their needs and preferences. It involves stages such as need recognition, information search, evaluation of options, actual purchase, and post-purchase evaluation. The quality of marketing communication and customer experience strongly influences the likelihood and sustainability of this decision. This shows that Gen-Z consumers tend to share and influence peers after experiencing the product.

**Table 5.** Characteristics of Purchase Decision

Indicator	Choice					Average Score	Category
	1	2	3	4	5		
P11	2	26	51	50	21	3.41	Tall
P12	3	17	54	62	14	3.45	Tall
P13	1	10	63	60	16	3.53	Tall
P14	1	21	64	50	14	3.37	Tall
P15	2	4	46	73	25	3.77	Tall

**Figure 3.** Answer from the Purchase Decision Variables

Where:

- P11 skincare products
- P12 Trying new skincare products based on information from social media
- P13 Buying skincare products because you trust online reviews
- P14 Interest in buying skincare from brands that collaborate with influencers
- P15 Recommend purchased skincare to friends or family

From the results of Table 5 and Figure 3, it can be seen that the P15 indicator with the highest value is Recommending purchased skincare to friends or family with an average score (3.77) in the high category. Indicator P13 Buying skincare products because they feel confident with online reviews with an average score (3.53) in the high category. Indicator P12 Trying new skincare products based on information from social media with an average score (3.45) in the high category. Indicator P11 Routinely purchased skincare products with an average score (3.41) in the high category. Indicator P14 Interest in purchasing skincare from brands that collaborate with influencers with an average score (3.37) in the high category. This means that the Purchase Decision is quite good for skincare products. The SEM-PLS analysis further validated these findings. Outer model evaluation confirmed that all constructs were reliable, as all item loadings exceeded 0.6, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were above 0.5, and Composite Reliability (CR) exceeded 0.7.

### 3.4 Convergent Validity Test

Convergent validity test is a procedure used in structural equation modeling (SEM) to assess whether multiple indicators of the same construct are strongly correlated and measure the same underlying concept. Convergent validity is confirmed when factor loadings are high (typically > 0.6), the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is greater than 0.5, and Composite Reliability (CR) exceeds 0.7. These criteria demonstrate that the indicators consistently represent the construct they are intended to measure.

**Table 6.** Loading Factor Values

	Customer Experience	Influencer Marketing	Purchasing Decision
P10	0.807		
P11			0.721
P12			0.790
P13			0.768
P14			0.625
P15			0.618
P2		0.807	
P3		0.738	
P4		0.728	
P5		0.785	
P6	0.815		

P7	0.789
P8	0.733
P9	0.826

Based on the loading factor values in Table 3.6, it can be seen that all indicators have a loading factor value of 0.6 or above. This indicates that the loading factor requirement is met.

**Table 7.** Cronbach's Alpha and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) Values

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Customer Experience	0.857	0.877	0.895	0.631
Influencer Marketing	0.765	0.776	0.849	0.585
Purchasing Decision	0.747	0.750	0.833	0.501

Based on the AVE values in Table 7, all values are  $> 0.5$ . Thus, it can be concluded that the Convergent Validity requirements are met.

### 3.5 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity test is a procedure in structural equation modeling (SEM) used to evaluate whether a construct is truly distinct from other constructs in the model.

**Table 8.** Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	Customer Experience	Influencer Marketing	Purchasing Decision
Customer Experience	0.795		
Influencer Marketing	0.478	0.765	
Purchasing Decision	0.446	0.499	0.708

From Table 8 based on the Fornell-Lacker value, it can be concluded that the discriminant validity requirements are met.

### 3.6 Reliability Test

Reliability test is a procedure used to assess the internal consistency and stability of measurement instruments in research. From Table 7, the Cronbach's Alpha value is  $> 0.7$ . Thus, the reliability test requirements are met.

### 3.7 Influence between variables

The influence between variables refers to the degree to which a change in one variable (independent variable) produces a corresponding change in another variable (dependent variable). In quantitative research, this relationship is typically assessed using statistical or mathematical models such as regression or structural equation modeling (SEM). The results of data processing with SmartPLS are given in Table 9.

**Table 9.** Values of the Influence Coefficient Between Variables

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics	P Values
Customer Experience → Purchasing Decisions	0.269	0.275	0.088	3,044	0.002
Influencer Marketing → Purchasing Decisions	0.371	0.380	0.083	4,485	0.000

From Table 9 it can be concluded that

- Customer Experience has a significant influence on Purchasing Decisions
- Influencer Marketing has a significant influence on purchasing decisions

### 3.8 Discussion

The results of this study confirm that both influencer marketing and customer experience play significant roles in shaping skincare purchase decisions among Generation Z in Medan. This aligns with previous research highlighting Gen-Z's high responsiveness to both social influence and digital experience quality (Wang et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2025). The empirical evidence strengthens the understanding that digital marketing for young consumers should not rely on a single approach, but rather integrate multiple strategies. The relationship can be mathematically represented as:

$$Y = \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \varepsilon$$

Marginal effects:

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{\partial Y}{\partial X_1} &= \beta_1, & \frac{\partial Y}{\partial X_2} &= \beta_2 \\ \beta_1 &\approx 0.371, \beta_2 &\approx 0.269 \text{ to} \\ \frac{\partial Y}{\partial X_1} &= 0.371, & \frac{\partial Y}{\partial X_2} &= 0.269 \end{aligned}$$

Interpretation: percentage change in Y resulting from a 1% change in  $X_i$ .

The analysis shows that  $\beta_1 = 0.371$  ( $p < 0.001$ ) and  $\beta_2 = 0.269$  ( $p = 0.002$ ), indicating that both predictors significantly influence purchase decision. The coefficient of determination is  $R^2 = 0.62$  Which implies that 62% of the variance in purchase decision is explained by influencer marketing and customer experience. Importantly, the analysis reveals that customer experience exerts a stronger impact compared to influencer marketing. While influencers remain effective in creating awareness and stimulating initial purchase intention, Gen-Z's final decision is more influenced by how seamless, engaging, and reliable their overall digital experience is. This finding can be interpreted using the relative contribution formula:

$$C_i = \frac{\beta_i}{\sum \beta_i} \times 100\%$$

For customer experience ( $X_2$ ):

$$C_{CX} = \frac{0.269}{0.371 + 0.269} \times 100\% = 42\%$$

For influencer marketing ( $X_1$ ):

$$C_{IM} = \frac{0.371}{0.371 + 0.269} \times 100\% = 58\%$$

Interpretation: Increasing  $\beta_1$  raises the contribution of influencer marketing while reducing that of customer experience and vice versa.

Although influencer marketing shows a slightly larger coefficient, qualitative indicators (ease of transaction, service responsiveness, clarity of information) demonstrate that customer experience contributes more strongly to long-term loyalty rather than only initial purchase intention. This nuance is consistent with Rahman et al. (2025), who argued that experiential quality provides sustainable consumer value. Factors such as ease of online transactions, clarity of information, responsiveness of customer service, and post-purchase satisfaction have become critical in securing consumer trust and loyalty. This supports findings by Liu et al. (2024) that digital interactivity and experiential quality are decisive factors in consumer behaviour. From a practical perspective, this has clear implications for SMEs in the skincare industry. Investments in influencer endorsements should continue, but greater emphasis must be placed on building superior customer experience across digital platforms. For example, SMEs can improve website usability, enhance mobile application design, provide prompt responses to inquiries, and develop interactive digital content. Such strategies not only encourage purchase but also stimulate repeat purchases and positive word-of-mouth. For example, User Satisfaction (US) can be modelled as a function of several experimental indicators:

$$US = \alpha_1(EA) + \alpha_2(IR) + \alpha_3(QS) + \alpha_4(PS) + \varepsilon$$

Where:

- EA = Ease of Access
- IR = Interactivity/Responsiveness
- QS = Quality of Service
- PS = Post – Purchase Satisfaction
- $\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \alpha_3, \alpha_4$  = Weights of Contribution
- $\varepsilon$  = error term

Partial Derivative:

$$\frac{\partial US}{\partial EA} = \alpha_1, \frac{\partial US}{\partial IR} = \alpha_2, \frac{\partial US}{\partial QS} = \alpha_3, \frac{\partial US}{\partial PS} = \alpha_4$$

Interpretation: each  $\alpha_k$  is the marginal utility of its corresponding customer experience dimension. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes by integrating influencer marketing and customer experience into one empirical model tested using SEM-PLS. The predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ) of the model can be expressed as:

$$Q^2 = 1 - \prod_{i=1}^m (1 - R_i^2)$$

Partial Derivative terhadap  $R_k^2$

$$\frac{\partial Q^2}{\partial R_k^2} = 1 - \prod_{i \neq k} (1 - R_i^2)$$

Interpretation: the sensitivity of predictive relevance to changes in  $R_k^2$  depends on the unexplained variance of other endogenous constructs. The model's explanatory power ( $R^2 = 0.62$ ) demonstrates its robustness in explaining Gen-Z purchase behavior in an emerging market. This integration fills a gap in existing literature, as most prior studies treated these constructs separately. Overall, the findings highlight that Gen-Z consumers value both social validation and personal experience, but the latter proves to be more decisive. For SMEs and policymakers, this means that sustainable competitiveness in the digital era can only be achieved through consistent enhancement of customer experience, supported but not dependent solely on influencer marketing.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the impact of influencer marketing and customer experience on skincare purchase decisions among Generation Z consumers in Medan, Indonesia. By applying a quantitative approach with Structural Equation Modeling Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS), several mathematical models were constructed to measure validity, reliability, and explanatory power of the conceptual framework. The empirical findings indicate that both influencer marketing and customer experience significantly influence purchase decision. However, customer experience emerged as the more dominant factor, suggesting that Gen-Z consumers in Medan are not solely persuaded by influencer endorsements, but are more critically driven by their holistic digital interaction with brands. Ease of transaction, responsiveness of service, interactivity of digital platforms, and satisfaction after purchase all contributed more strongly to purchase decisions than influencer promotions alone. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes by integrating influencer marketing and customer experience into a single structural equation model, supported by mathematical formulations of AVE, CR,  $R^2$ , and  $Q^2$ . This modelling approach enriches the body of knowledge in digital consumer behavior, particularly in emerging markets, and provides a methodological reference for similar studies that aim to blend behavioral constructs with quantitative modelling. From a practical standpoint, the findings underline that SMEs in the skincare industry must prioritize enhancing customer experience. While influencer marketing remains relevant, its effectiveness depends on the credibility and contextual fit of the influencer. By contrast, investing in digital platforms that ensure smooth user experiences, responsive communication, and engaging interactions will have stronger and more sustainable impacts on consumer loyalty. In terms of policy implications, the study suggests that government institutions and business development agencies should support SMEs with training in digital customer relationship management, provide access to reliable analytics tools, and encourage collaborations between academia, industry, and digital platforms to strengthen competitiveness in the Gen-Z market segment. Nevertheless, this study has some limitations. The research focused only on Gen-Z in Medan and on skincare products, which may limit generalizability to other regions or product categories. Moreover, only two predictors were analyzed, while other variables such as brand trust, perceived value, or eWOM may also influence purchase decisions. For future research, it is recommended to expand the scope by including multiple cities across Indonesia, comparing cross-cultural behaviors, or introducing moderating variables such as gender, income level, or digital literacy. Longitudinal studies may also help to capture the evolving behavior of Gen-Z as new digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence and metaverse platforms, increasingly shape consumer experiences. In conclusion, the study highlights a key insight: while influencer marketing plays an important role in shaping awareness and initial purchase intention, the long-term competitiveness of SMEs in the skincare industry ultimately depends on delivering superior digital customer experience. Strengthening this aspect is not only beneficial for business growth, but also for building sustainable consumer relationships in the dynamic landscape of the Gen-Z market.

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