How User-Generated Content Drives Purchase Decisions: The Mediating Role of Brand Awareness

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between consumer-driven social media promotions and final buying choices within a culinary micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME), focusing on the potential intervening function of brand awareness. As market rivalries intensify across the food and beverage landscape, small businesses increasingly leverage organic peer content on networks like Instagram and TikTok as a budget-friendly mechanism to captivate audiences and secure their market footprint. The framework adopts a quantitative explanatory research design. Primary data were gathered through webbased questionnaires completed by specific patrons who had interacted with user-led media regarding the establishment and subsequently completed a physical transaction. Participants were chosen via a purposive sampling strategy, and the gathered datasets were processed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). Statistical evaluations confirmed that both the measurement and structural frameworks met all required criteria, establishing high validity and reliability for the research instruments. Moreover, the statistical outcomes reveal that content generated by consumers significantly enhances brand awareness, and higher brand familiarity correlates positively with client selections. Simultaneously, customer-driven media exhibits a direct, positive association with ultimate purchasing paths. Brand awareness was shown to serve a bridging role, intensifying the relationship linking user content to ultimate transactional actions. These insights indicate that small culinary operations can achieve substantial growth by intentionally encouraging and managing customer-created media as a core pillar of their electronic marketing architecture.

Keywords: Brand Awareness, Purchase Decision, Small And Medium Enterprise, Social Media Marketing; User-Generated Content.

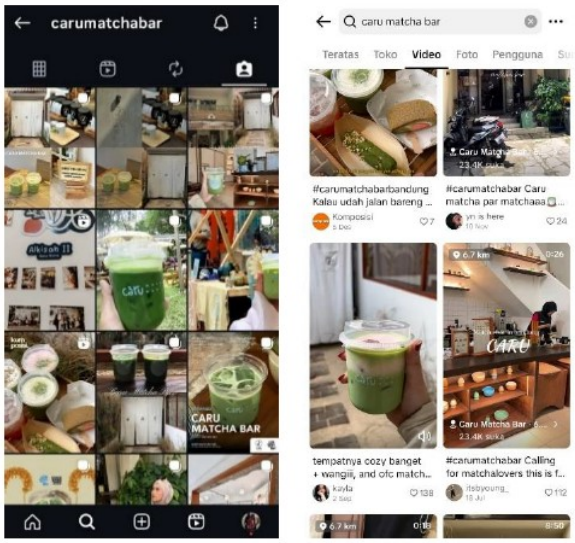
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INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped how modern businesses interact with their target audiences, changing traditional marketing dynamics into fast-paced digital exchanges. Within this ecosystem, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) particularly those navigating the highly volatile food and beverage (F&B) sector face intense pressure to adopt agile digital strategies to secure market longevity [1]. Caru Matcha Bar in Bandung represents a unique case study within this shifting landscape. By introducing a highly focused traditional Japanese minimalist concept, this specific artisanal establishment targets a highly digital-native demographic, specifically targeting Generation Z and Millennial demographics through visual content streams.

Operating within a distinct culinary niche, Caru Matcha Bar circumvents the need for high-cost paid advertisement campaigns by instead inspiring its patrons to document and broadcast their dining experiences organically. This form of voluntary, user-driven media creation comprising consumer-shot photography, short-form video reels, and unedited peer reviews is defined as User-Generated Content (UGC) [2]. Scholarly consensus indicates that UGC commands significantly higher public trust and perceived authenticity than conventional firm-led marketing campaigns, serving as a powerful validation tool that lowers purchase hesitation among prospective buyers [2][3].



(Source: Researcher's Documentation, 2025)

Figure 1. UGC Posts on Caru Matcha Bar on Instagram and TikTok

Prior research extensively establishes the efficacy of User-Generated Content (UGC) in shaping buyer choices across e-commerce giants, hospitality chains, and multinational enterprises [4][5]. In these corporate settings, brand awareness serves as a well-documented intermediary that nurtures long-term consumer trust before conversion occurs [6][7]. However, this established framework assumes a linear

consumer journey that may not fully capture the dynamics of localized, subculture-driven micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Niche culinary operations rely heavily on hyper-visual, spontaneous engagement rather than broad brand equity, creating a clear literature gap regarding how traditional mediation paths operate within small-scale digital marketing contexts [1][8].

Addressing this gap is urgent as culinary MSMEs face severe capital constraints and high failure rates, making cost-free social media exposure on platforms like TikTok and Instagram their main survival mechanism [1]. Understanding whether organic consumer content drives sales directly or works through sustained brand building allows small business owners to allocate scarce marketing resources effectively. The novelty of this investigation lies in empirical testing of brand awareness as a mediator within a highly visual, Gen Z-focused artisanal matcha bar (Caru Matcha Bar). By examining this interaction, the study provides empirical evidence on how organic digital word-of-mouth converts peer engagement into actual purchases in niche F&B markets.

Based on this structural framework, this investigation aims to map out the descriptive metrics of UGC, brand awareness, and purchasing choices among the patrons of Caru Matcha Bar. Furthermore, it analyzes the direct impact of organic content on transactional behavior, alongside exploring the indirect paths of this relationship through the lens of brand awareness mediation. These insights are expected to enrich academic literature surrounding digital consumer behavior while serving as a tactical blueprint for F&B operators looking to optimize organic community participation across social media networks.

Formulation of The Problem

Based on the background described above, the formulation of the problem underlying this research is as follows:

1. How is the overview of User-Generated Content (UGC), Brand Awareness, and purchasing decisions at MSMEs Caru Matcha Bar?
2. Does User-Generated Content (UGC) directly affect purchasing decisions at MSMEs Caru Matcha Bar?
3. Does User-Generated Content (UGC) affect purchasing decisions mediated by Brand Awareness at MSMEs Caru Matcha Bar?

Writing Purpose

Based on the background of the problem and the formulation of the problem above, the purpose of writing that underlies this research is:

1. To determine the descriptive overview of User-Generated Content (UGC), Brand Awareness, and purchasing decisions at MSMEs Caru Matcha Bar.

2. To analyze the direct effect of User-Generated Content (UGC) on purchasing decisions at MSMEs Caru Matcha Bar.
3. To analyze the effect of User-Generated Content (UGC) on purchasing decisions mediated by Brand Awareness at MSMEs Caru Matcha Bar.

LITERATURE REVIEW

User-Generated Content (UGC)

User-Generated Content (UGC) encompasses non-sponsored digital media—ranging from customer reviews and photo logs to short video reels—shared independently on social channels [10]. Originating directly from fellow consumers rather than marketing agencies, UGC carries higher perceived objectivity and trustworthiness, effectively driving stronger public confidence and online participation [7][9][11]. This study operationalizes UGC across three primary dimensions: credibility, authenticity, and informativeness [7].

Brand Awareness

Brand awareness reflects a consumer's mental capability to identify or remember a specific brand name among competitors in a given sector [12]. As conceptualized by Aaker [5], it represents a fundamental strategic advantage, as buyers naturally favor familiar entities, thereby enhancing brand equity and customer attachment [3][12]. Operationalized through [14], this variable encompasses four stages: brand unawareness, brand recognition, brand recall, and top-of-mind status.

Purchase Decision

The buying decision marks the behavioral phase where consumers evaluate options and execute monetary transactions to fulfill identified needs [15][16]. External promotional triggers, including user feedback and brand recognition, heavily condition this final transactional step [17]. Based on [18], the construct is evaluated through six dimensions: product choice, brand selection, outlet choice, timing of purchase, transaction amount, and payment method.

Hypothesis

H_1: User-Generated Content (UGC) demonstrates a statistically significant positive impact on Brand Awareness at Caru Matcha Bar.

H_2: Brand Awareness plays a statistically significant positive role in driving Purchase Decision at Caru Matcha Bar.

H_3: User-Generated Content (UGC) positively and directly shapes Purchase Decision to a significant degree at Caru Matcha Bar.

H_4: User-Generated Content (UGC) significantly and positively affects Purchase Decision through the mediating mechanism of Brand Awareness at Caru Matcha Bar.

RESEARCH METHODS

This empirical inquiry utilizes an explanatory quantitative design to dissect the direct and indirect linkages between consumer-generated media, brand familiarity, and final transactional decisions. With a particular emphasis on the small-scale culinary sector, the study models whether consumer-driven digital word-of-mouth directly triggers sales or operates through the necessary mediating mechanism of brand awareness.

Research Design

The demographic focus centered on Bandung-based buyers who had previously engaged with user-created content linked to Caru Matcha Bar. Navigating an unquantifiable total population, this research deployed purposive sampling to recruit informants based on three mandatory conditions. Respondents needed to be regular users of Instagram or TikTok, have a history of watching organic reviews of the establishment, and possess a track record of at least one verified purchase post-exposure. This targeted filtering ultimately locked in 137 qualified respondents for the empirical analysis.

Research Limits

Data collection focused on customers of Bandung's Caru Matcha Bar who had previously interacted with organic social media content. A non-probability purposive sampling approach was necessary since the total number of these consumers remains unknown. To filter for relevance, we applied three distinct benchmarks. Respondents had to be active Instagram or TikTok users, have seen authentic peer reviews of the establishment, and have bought something there at least once after seeing those posts. Ultimately, these strict requirements left us with a highly targeted dataset of 137 valid respondents for structural modeling.

Variable Identification

Independent Variable (X) - User-Generated Content (UGC): Unprompted digital posts shared by consumers [10], operationalized through three core dimensions: credibility, authenticity, and informativeness [7].

Mediating Variable (Z) - Brand Awareness: The cognitive recognition or recall of a brand name [12], systematically evaluated through four distinct dimensions: unaware of brand, brand recognition, brand recall, and top of mind [14].

Dependent Variable (Y) - Purchase Decision: The actual transactional behavior of acquiring goods [8]. It is measured through six explicit operational dimensions: product choice, brand choice, dealer choice, purchase timing, purchase amount, and payment method [4].

Participants and Setting

The target group comprised Caru Matcha Bar patrons in Bandung, West Java, who completed an online questionnaire in the first semester of 2026. Facing an unmeasurable population size, the study utilized non-probability purposive sampling. Respondents were selected based on three criteria: active Instagram or TikTok usage, exposure to organic brand UGC, and a subsequent purchase history. This distribution successfully yielded 137 valid, voluntary, and anonymous responses.

Measurement

Data Colletion

Primary data collection utilized a 7-point Likert scale questionnaire distributed via Google Forms to qualified Caru Matcha Bar consumers in Bandung [1]. Meanwhile, secondary information was sourced from existing literature reviews and official social analytics from the @carumatchabar account [1].

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was executed via Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 4 in two stages [1][14]:

1. Measurement Model Assessment (Outer Model): Involves verifying factor loadings (0.70), AVE (0.50), composite reliability alongside Cronbach's alpha (> 0.70), and discriminant validity using HTMT thresholds (< 0.90). Four low-performing indicators of Purchase Decision (KP1, KP2, KP3, and KP9) were excluded to maintain structural integrity.
2. Structural Model Assessment (Inner Model): Assesses VIF levels (< 5.0), goodness-of-fit metrics (SRMR < 0.08, NFI >0.90), and explained variance (R^2). To evaluate the structural paths, a 5,000-resample bootstrapping procedure was executed to obtain standardized path estimates, t-statistics (> 1.96), and significance levels ($p < 0.05$).

RESULT

Responden Characteristics

The present study involved 137 participants who were consumers of Caru Matcha Bar in Bandung and met the study criteria. The demographic details of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics (Most Dominan)

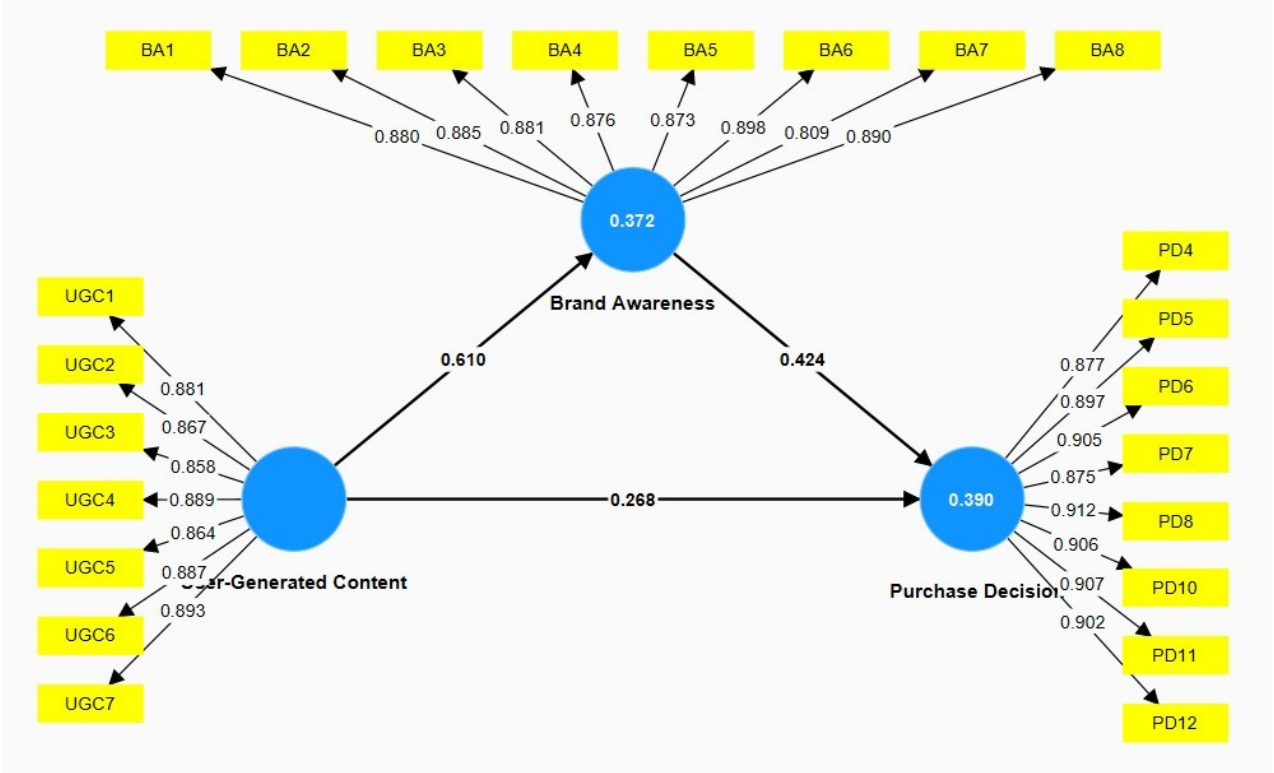
Category / Variable	Most Dominant Profile (Majority)	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Demographics			
Age	17 – 22 years old	61	43.88%
Occupation	Students / College Students	71	51.08%
Domicile	Bandung Regency	48	34.53%
Monthly Income / Allowance	IDR 1,000,000 – IDR 2,999,999	75	53.96%
Media Consumption & UGC Interaction			
Social Media to View UGC	Tik Tok	78	56.10%
Most Frequently Used Platform	Tik Tok	74	53.24%
Most Frequently Viewed UGC Type	Tik TokVideos	57	41.00%
Frequency of Viewing Content	A few times a month	52	37.41%
Purchase Experience & UGC Influence			
Ever Viewed UGC of Caru Matcha Bar	Yes	137	100.00%
Ever Purchased the Product	Yes	137	100.00%
Purchase Frequency	2 – 3 times	54	38.85%
Reading/Viewing UGC Before Purchase	Sometimes	52	37.41%

Source: Primary Data, 2026

As demonstrated in Table 2, the respondents are heavily dominated by the digital-native Generation Z demographic. Specifically, those aged 17–22 years account for the largest portion (43.88%), followed by the 23–28 age bracket (36.69%). This age distribution aligns with the dominant occupation of the respondents, where more than half are students or college students (51.08%). Geographically, the majority of the consumers reside within Bandung Regency (34.53%) and Bandung City (31.65%). From an economic perspective, the majority of the respondents possess a monthly income or allowance of IDR 1,000,000 – IDR 2,999,999 (53.96%).

Looking at the Model of Assessment (Outer Model)

The outer model was evaluated to assess the convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability of the constructs. During model purification, indicators KP1, KP2, KP3, and KP9 from the Purchase Decision construct were eliminated for failing to meet the minimum loading factor threshold of ≥ 0.70. Post-elimination, the measurement model is fully fit, with all remaining indicators exhibiting high loading factors ranging from 0.809 to 0.912, establishing a valid and reliable final model for subsequent structural testing.



Source: Processed primary data, 2026

Figure 2. Model of Assessment (Outer Model)

Convergent Validity and Reliability

The evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) demonstrates excellent validity and reliability, confirming that the questionnaire is highly fit for structural model (inner model) testing. All three constructs significantly exceed the required reliability threshold (> 0.70) for both Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (rho_c), led by Purchase Decision (0.966 & 0.971), followed by Brand Awareness (0.956 & 0.963) and User-Generated Content (0.950 & 0.959). Furthermore, convergent validity is fully satisfied as the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all variables are well above the 0.50 critical limit, with Purchase Decision recording the highest at 0.806, followed by User-Generated Content at 0.769, and Brand Awareness at 0.765.

Table 2. Results of The Measurement Model Evaluation

Variabel / Indikator	Outher Louding	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Relliability (rho_a)	Composite Relliability (rho_c)	Avereage Varlance Extracted (AVE)
User-Generated Content		0.950	0.950	0.959	0.769

Variabel / Indikator	Outher Louding	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Relliability (rho_a)	Composite Relliability (rho_c)	Avereage Varlance Extracted (AVE)
UGC1	0.881				
UGC2	0.867				
UGC3	0.858				
UGC4	0.889				
UGC5	0.864				
UGC6	0.887				
UGC7	0.893				
Brand Awareness		0.956	0.959	0.963	0.765
BA1	0.880				
BA2	0.885				
BA3	0.881				
BA4	0.876				
BA5	0.873				
BA6	0.898				
BA7	0.809				
BA8	0.890				
Purcahse Decision		0.966	0.967	0.971	0.806
PD4	0.877				
PD5	0.897				
PD6	0.905				
PD7	0.875				
PD8	0.912				
PD10	0.906				
PD11	0.907				
PD12	0.902				

Source: SmartPLS Data Analysis, 2026

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was examined through the application of the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) method.

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	Brand Awareness	Purchase Decision	User-Generated Content
Brand Awareness			
Purchase Decision	0.607		
User-Generated Content	0.636	0.548	

Source: SmartPLS Data Analysis, 2026

The HTMT evaluation establishes satisfactory discriminant validity as all inter-construct ratios remain well below the 0.90 threshold, peaking safely at 0.636. This confirms that User-Generated

Content, Brand Awareness, and Purchase Decision are empirically distinct dimensions, allowing the measurement model to proceed to structural testing.

Evaluation of the Structural Model (Inner Model)

The structural model was evaluated for multicollinearity, the coefficient of determination, and model fit prior to proceeding with hypothesis testing.

Multicollinearity Test

Table 4. Results of the Multicollinearity Test (Inner VIF Values)

Variabel	VIF
Brand Awareness → Purchase Decision	1.591
User-Generated Content → Brand Awareness	1.000
User-Generated Content → Purchase Decision	1.591

Source: SmartPLS Data Analysis, 2026

Table 4, the inner VIF values for all structural pathways range from 1.000 to 1.591. Specifically, the paths leading to Purchase Decision score 1.591, while User-Generated Content to Brand Awareness is at 1.000. Since all of these values are well below the critical threshold of 5.0, the structural model is confirmed to be entirely free from multicollinearity issues.

Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Table 5. R-square

	R-square	R-square adjusted
Brand Awareness	0.372	0.367
Purchase Decision	0.390	0.381

Source: SmartPLS Data Analysis, 2026

R^2 value for the Brand Awareness variable stands at 0.372, implying that approximately 37.2% of the variation in brand awareness can be explained by User-Generated Content. In contrast, the R^2 value for Purchase Decision is 0.390, demonstrating that 39.0% of the variance in purchasing decisions is driven by the collective impact of both User-Generated Content and Brand Awareness. The remaining variance is accounted for by external factors not captured within this research model.

Model Fit

Table 6. Goodness of Fit

Indeks FIT	Nilai	Kriteria (Cut-off)
SRMR	0.041	0.041
NFI	0.918	0.918

Source: SmartPLS Data Analysis, 2026

The research model demonstrates a good fit, generating an SRMR of 0.041, which is well below the standard 0.08 threshold. Additionally, the NFI value reaches 0.918, successfully exceeding the minimum benchmark of 0.90. These results confirm that the model is statistically robust and appropriate for subsequent hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis Testing

The research employed the SmartPLS bootstrapping technique to examine the formulated hypotheses.

Table 7. Results of Hypothesis Testing (Path Coefficients)

Path	Original Sample (O)	*t* - statistics	*p* -value
Brand Awareness → Purchase Decision	0.424	4.213	0.000
User-Generated Content → Brand Awareness	0.610	7.702	0.000
User-Generated Content → Purchase Decision	0.268	2.744	0.006
User-Generated Content → Brand Awareness → Purchase Decision	0.258	0.255	0.076

Source: SmartPLS Data Analysis, 2026

The statistical evaluation yields partial empirical validation for the hypothesized structural paths. Initially, data analysis indicates that consumer-created media profoundly improves direct Purchase Decisions ($\beta = 0.268$; $t = 2.744$; $p = 0.006$), thereby supporting Hypothesis 1. This statistical outcome confirms that content created by users directly and effectively drives consumers' final purchasing choices.

Furthermore, User-Generated Content exhibits a robust and meaningful driving force toward Brand Awareness ($\beta = 0.610$; $t = 7.702$; $p < 0.001$), thus supporting Hypothesis 2. Concurrently, a substantial positive impact is observed from Brand Awareness onto consumer buying actions ($\beta = 0.424$; $t = 4.213$; $p < 0.001$) supports Hypothesis 3, validating the critical role of brand recognition in shaping consumer buying behavior.

In summary, structural testing confirms that user-driven media directly boosts purchasing actions ($\beta = 0.268$, $p = 0.006$) and strongly fosters brand familiarity ($\beta = 0.610$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H_1 and H_2. In turn, heightened brand recognition significantly promotes buying choices ($\beta = 0.424$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H_3. Crucially, mediation analysis confirms that brand awareness functions as a statistically significant partial mediator ($\beta = 0.258$, $p = 0.001$), fully supporting H_4. This demonstrates that organic content drives sales both directly and indirectly through enhanced brand familiarity.

DISCUSSION

Unprompted social updates from client networks widely known as User-Generated Content (UGC) serve as a vital driver for transactional actions within localized dining markets. Our structural

configuration verifies a direct, significant linkage connecting organic UGC to real purchasing conversions (β = 0.268; p = 0.006). This pattern highlights a clear transition in consumer habits, where authentic peer recommendations carry far more weight than standard corporate advertisements. Such a finding corroborates the perspective of [7], who observed that the unbiased nature of crowd-sourced reviews successfully lowers a buyer's internal hesitation. At Caru Matcha Bar, this dynamic is triggered by its "minimalist Japanese" design. When patrons capture and post this aesthetic spontaneously online, it lowers the perceived risk for prospective diners, illustrating how modern digital outreach relies heavily on honest consumer voices.

The data also points to a massive impact of user content on shifting brand visibility (β = 0.610; t = 7.702; p < 0.001). This strong association aligns with the conceptual paths laid out by [11]. Voluntary social media uploads clearly expand public familiarity; as individuals scroll through TikTok and Instagram clips, they unconsciously build a mental map of the business. This mechanism supports the step-by-step framework of brand salience described by [5], where repeated visual encounters gradually mature into solid brand recognition. For a food and beverage enterprise like Caru Matcha Bar, this steady stream of citizen-made media keeps the venue highly relevant to Gen Z and Millennial cohorts, who depend on crowdsourced imagery to filter their dining destinations.

Empirical testing highlights that brand familiarity serves as a vital bridge connecting user content to final sales outcomes (β = 0.258; t = 3.413; p = 0.001). Visual stories shared across TikTok and Instagram gradually enhance brand recall over time, mitigating prospective diner hesitation and encouraging physical visits to Caru Matcha Bar.

The resulting insights offer both conceptual breakthroughs and actionable value. From a theoretical standpoint, this study refutes the classic, linear "Awareness-to-Action" model within short-form video environments. It shows that highly trusted peer content can spark spontaneous purchases without requiring deep cognitive evaluation of brand equity. On a practical level, Caru Matcha Bar should pivot away from broad corporate branding efforts toward nurturing close-knit, high-trust micro-communities. Keeping the layout photogenic ("Instagrammable") and rewarding customers for organic social tagging can tap directly into the immediate conversion potential of UGC. To survive in a crowded market, small business owners must prioritize real customer experiences, keeping the online visual narrative transparent and informative to protect direct conversion rates.

CONCLUSION

This study establishes that User-Generated Content, Brand Awareness, and Purchase Decisions at Caru Matcha Bar fall into the high descriptive category, reflecting active digital engagement and positive market feedback. The structural analysis reveals that organic consumer media directly improves both

brand recognition and purchasing behavior, while brand awareness independently prompts the transactional stage. Crucially, brand awareness serves as a statistically significant mediator between organic user content and purchasing decisions (β=0.258; t=3.413; p=0.001). While user-created content directly drives buying choices, its total impact is further amplified as peer validation elevates brand recall among prospective buyers.

Consequently, practitioners at Caru Matcha Bar should pivot their digital strategies away from resource-heavy brand building toward maximizing direct conversion channels. Management can achieve this by designing a photogenic, highly shareable physical environment that naturally encourages patrons to document their visits online. To keep this stream of trustworthy posts active, management should offer small perks for location tags, host engaging digital activities, and stay closely attuned to patron reviews. Embracing this organic involvement enables the shop to convert instant social proof into long-term financial stability and steady sales increases.

SUGGESTION

These insights suggest that Caru Matcha Bar's management ought to prioritize immediate call-to-action mechanisms within consumer posts over costly, long-term brand equity initiatives. To naturally stimulate organic posting, the store should regularly update its interior layout to keep it visually striking and highly photogenic. Additionally, offering immediate perks like minor price reductions or complimentary menu add-ons for patrons who tag the venue in live Instagram stories or TikTok clips can keep authentic peer recommendations flowing continuously. This approach allows the brand to capture the instant persuasive power of user feedback, directly turning digital views into physical foot traffic and revenue.

To better comprehend how rapidly short-form platforms turn viewers into buyers, upcoming studies should evaluate different mediating variables, such as customer trust, perceived worth, or spontaneous shopping tendencies. Expanding the participant pool and exploring diverse artisanal MSMEs outside the food and beverage industry would also help confirm if this non-mediating model applies universally. Lastly, investigating how varying presentation styles like algorithmic short-form reels compared to static photo galleries shape audience reactions would offer a clearer window into today's shifting digital consumer psychology.

CREDIT AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Irma Ronauli Patricia: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, and Writing – review & editing. **Ati Mustikasari, & Laksmi Saraswati Hadiansyah**: Conceptualization, Supervision, Validation, and Writing – review & editing.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

Data will be made available on request.

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ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval no patient-identifying parts in this paper were used or known to the authors. Therefore, no ethical approval was requested.

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