

The Role of Brand Identity and Digital Marketing on Visit Intent and Purchase Decisions; "The Effect of *Electronic Word of Mouth Mediation* Among Generation Z and Millennials on Local Coffee SMEs"

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Abstract

This study investigates the effects of brand identity and digital marketing on visit intention and purchase decision among Generation Z and Millennial consumers at a local coffee SME (PETRO'S COFFEE) in Sidikalang, Indonesia, with electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) as a mediating variable. A quantitative explanatory approach was employed using purposive sampling, resulting in 117 valid respondents who had made purchases within the last six months. Data were collected through a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results reveal that brand identity has a positive and significant effect on visit intention, while digital marketing significantly influences purchase decision both directly and indirectly through e-WOM. The mediating role of e-WOM indicates that online reviews and consumer-generated recommendations strengthen the effectiveness of digital marketing communication. The coefficient of determination values demonstrate moderate to strong predictive power of the proposed model. This study contributes to the branding and digital marketing literature by providing empirical evidence from local coffee SMEs in non-metropolitan areas. Practically, the findings offer strategic insights for SME owners to integrate strong brand identity with digital marketing initiatives to engage younger consumers more effectively.

Keywords: Brand Identity; Digital Marketing; Electronic Word of Mouth; Visit Intention; Purchase Decision; Coffee SMEs

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Introduction

Coffee is no longer seen simply as a consumer commodity, but has evolved to become part of the lifestyle, culture, and social identity of modern society. The International Coffee Organization (ICO, 2023) noted that Indonesia is the world's fourth-largest coffee producer, with a significant contribution from Arabica coffee grown in mountainous areas. One of the leading coffee-producing areas is Sidikalang, Dairi Regency, North Sumatra, which is known to have a distinctive taste, strong aroma, and balanced acidity level. This potential makes Sidikalang coffee a strategic commodity that can be developed not only in the upstream sector, but also in the downstream industry through strengthening coffee shop MSMEs.

In the last two decades, the growth of the coffee shop industry in Indonesia has shown a significant trend. Toffin Indonesia (2022) reported that the growth of coffee shops reached around 8.5% per year, mainly driven by the consumption of urban people from Generation Z and Millennials. These two generations are not only looking for the quality of coffee taste, but also space experiences, aesthetic atmospheres, digital access, and brand experiences that are in harmony with their lifestyles (Katadata Insight Center, 2023). This condition makes brand identity and digital marketing a key factor in the success of the coffee shop business.

In the context of MSMEs, Petro's Coffee located in Sidikalang is present as a local coffee shop that carries the peculiarities of Sidikalang coffee. However, as an MSME player, Petro's Coffee faces various challenges, such as limited resources, increasing competition with modern coffee shops and national franchises, and demands to build a strong brand identity to be able to compete sustainably. Brand identity is an important foundation in shaping consumer perception and creating differentiation in the market. Aaker (1996) states that brand identity is a set of brand associations that companies want to build and maintain to create distinctive meaning and value in the minds of consumers.

On the other hand, digital marketing plays a strategic role in reaching young consumers. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube enable MSMEs to build engagement through visual content, storytelling, and two-way interaction (Siregar, 2023). However, many coffee MSMEs, including Petro's Coffee, have not made optimal use of digital marketing potential. The content displayed is often inconsistent, poorly conceptualized, and not fully in line with the preferences of Generation Z and Millennials. In fact, Google Consumer Insight (2022) shows that the majority of young consumers look for coffee shop information through social media before making a visit.

In addition, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) is an important factor in influencing consumer purchase decisions. Online reviews, digital recommendations, and user-generated content have proven to have high credibility in the eyes of young consumers, thus being able to strengthen the influence of digital marketing on purchasing behavior (Ismagilova et al., 2023). Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of how brand identity and digital marketing affect visitor interest and purchase decisions, both directly and through e-WOM, is needed.

Based on these conditions, this study focuses on analyzing the influence of brand identity and digital marketing on the visit interest and purchase decisions of Generation Z and Millennial consumers at Petro's Coffee, with e-WOM as the mediating variable. This research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of branding and digital marketing studies on coffee MSMEs, as well as provide practical recommendations for business actors in designing relevant and sustainable marketing strategies.

Literature Review

Brand identity theory

Brand identity is a set of elements designed to shape the perception and unique image of a brand in the minds of consumers. Aaker (1996) defines brand identity as a set of brand associations

that companies want to create and maintain to provide meaning, promise, and differentiation. Kapferer (2012) refers to brand identity as the "brand DNA" that determines the personality, values, and competitive position of the brand in the long run. Keller (2013) emphasizes that brand identity is not only limited to visual symbols such as logos, but encompasses all aspects of brand communication and experience that are consistently delivered to consumers.

Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism model (2012) groups brand identity into six main dimensions, namely physical (visual), personality, culture, relationships, reflection, and self-image. In the context of coffee MSMEs, visual elements such as logos, interior design, and packaging become early representations of brand identity, while the value of locality, service quality, and product narrative strengthen consumers' emotional associations (Wardani et al., 2022; Ardianto et al., 2024). Indicators of brand identity measurement include logo and brand name fame, visual consistency, tagline relevance, uniqueness of products and services, emotional connectedness, and positive brand associations (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2013).

Generation Z and Millennials are segments that are very sensitive to brand identity. The Katadata Insight Center (2023) reports that the majority of Gen Z consumers choose coffee shops with aesthetic and Instagrammable designs, while Millennials tend to prioritize service quality, atmosphere, and consistency of brand experience (Arisanti, 2021). Therefore, strengthening brand identity is an important strategy for coffee MSMEs in attracting and retaining young consumers.

Digital Marketing

Digital marketing is a marketing communication strategy that utilizes digital technology and internet-based platforms to reach audiences in a more personalized, interactive, and measurable way. Kotler and Keller (2021) define digital marketing as a marketing activity that uses digital media to create added value for consumers and build long-term relationships. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) emphasize that digital marketing includes the use of digital technology to support marketing activities and achieve business goals effectively.

Forms of digital marketing that are relevant for coffee MSMEs include social media marketing, content marketing, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), influencer marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), paid advertising, and digital customer relationship management (CRM). Social media marketing through platforms such as Instagram and TikTok allows MSMEs to display visual content and storytelling that is interesting to Generation Z and Millennials (Siregar, 2023). Content marketing plays a role in building long-term relationships through the provision of educational and informative content (Umami & Darma, 2021). Influencer and micro-influencer marketing are considered effective for MSMEs because they are considered more authentic and relevant to the local community (Ardianto et al., 2024).

The success of digital marketing is determined by the quality of content, the level of interactivity, the speed of response, the utilization of local influencers, and the authenticity and authenticity of the brand's message (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Google Consumer Insight, 2022). Digital marketing indicators include the frequency and consistency of posts, follower growth, engagement rate, quality of visual and storytelling content, the number and impact of positive reviews, and the level of consumer trust (Santoso & Junaedi, 2021; Siregar, 2023).

Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM)

Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) is a form of communication between consumers that occurs through digital media, such as online reviews, comments on social media, and online recommendations. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) define e-WOM as positive or negative statements made by consumers regarding a product or brand and available to many people through the internet. Armawan and Denisya (2023) stated that e-WOM has a significant influence on brand image and purchase intent because it is considered more credible than company marketing communications.

In the context of coffee shops, positive reviews and user-generated content can increase trust and strengthen purchasing decisions, especially among Generation Z and Millennials who rely heavily on digital recommendations (Ismagilova et al., 2023). Consumer engagement formed through social media interaction is able to strengthen consumer-brand relationships and improve behavioral outcomes (Mesra et al., 2024).

Interest Visits and Purchase Decisions

Purchasing decisions are a stage where consumers go through various considerations until they finally decide whether or not to buy a product or service (Pane, 2018). Isa and Istikomah (2020) explained that purchasing decisions are part of consumer behavior which includes the process of choosing, buying, using, and evaluating products to meet their needs and desires. Supu et al. (2021) stated that purchasing decisions involve the process of identifying problems, searching for information, evaluating alternatives, and purchasing actions.

Visitation interest in the context of a coffee shop can be understood as a consumer's tendency or intention to visit or return to a coffee shop after exposure to certain information, experience, or marketing stimuli. Interest in visits is influenced by the perception of product quality, the atmosphere of the place, brand image, and recommendations from other parties (Santoso & Junaedi, 2021).

Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis

A strong brand identity is believed to be able to form positive perceptions and increase consumer interest through differentiation and emotional attachment (Aaker, 1996; Wardani et al., 2022). Digital marketing serves as the main channel in building awareness, engagement, and purchasing decisions through interactive communication (Kotler & Keller, 2021; Santoso & Junaedi, 2021). e-WOM acts as a mediator that strengthens the influence of digital marketing on purchase decisions through consumer reviews and recommendations (Armawan & Denisya, 2023).

Based on this framework, the research hypothesis is formulated as follows:

H1: Brand identity has a positive effect on the interest of consumer visits of Generation Z and Millennials. H2: Digital marketing has a positive effect on the purchase decisions of Generation Z and Millennial consumers. H3: e-WOM has a positive effect on the interest of visits and consumer purchase decisions. H4: e-WOM mediates the influence of digital marketing on consumer purchasing decisions.

Research Methodology

Types and Approaches to Research

This study uses an explanatory quantitative approach that aims to test the causal relationship between brand identity and digital marketing variables on visitor interest and purchase decisions with e-WOM as a mediating variable. This approach is suitable for testing conceptual models in the context of coffee MSME marketing (Santoso & Junaedi, 2021).

Research Location and Time

The research was carried out at Petro's Coffee, Sidikalang, Dairi Regency, North Sumatra. Data collection was carried out in the period August-September 2025, including the stages of instrument preparation, validation, data collection, analysis, and reporting of research results.

Population and Sample

The study population was all Generation Z (18–27 years old) and Millennial (28–60 years old) consumers who had purchased products at Petro's Coffee in the last six months. The sampling

technique used purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) aged 18–60 years, (2) have purchased the product at least once in the last six months, and (3) actively use social media.

Based on calculations using the Slovin formula with an error rate of 5%, a sample size of at least 80 respondents was obtained. However, in the implementation of the research, 117 questionnaires were collected that were worth analysis.

Data Collection Techniques

Primary data was obtained through the distribution of a five-point Likert scale questionnaire to respondents as well as semi-structured interviews with Petro's Coffee management to obtain supporting information on branding and digital marketing strategies. Secondary data is obtained from books, scientific journals, industry reports, and related official sources.

Variable Operational Definition

1. **Brand Identity (X₁):** Measured through indicators of logo popularity, visual consistency, tagline relevance, product uniqueness, and emotional connectedness of consumers (Aaker, 1996; Wardani et al., 2022).
2. **Digital Marketing (X₂):** Measured by post frequency, engagement rate, content quality and storytelling, influencer collaboration, and e-WOM (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Siregar, 2023).
3. **Electronic Word of Mouth (Z):** Measured through the intensity of positive reviews, user-generated content, and friend recommendations (Armawan & Denisya, 2023).
4. **Visit Interest (Y₁):** Measured by the intention to revisit, interest in trying new menus, and willingness to invite others (Santoso & Junaedi, 2021).
5. **Purchase Decision (Y₂):** Measured through purchase frequency, loyalty, willingness to pay, and brand preference (Kotler & Keller, 2021).

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis included descriptive analysis to describe respondent characteristics and answer distribution, instrument validity and reliability test, and structural model testing using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The validity test was performed by item-total correlation ($r_{\text{calculate}} > r_{\text{of the table}}$ at $\alpha = 0.05$), while the reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha \geq 0.70$). The hypothesis test was carried out through bootstrapping with a significance criterion of $p < 0.05$.

Results

Respondent Description

This study involved 117 respondents consisting of Generation Z (48 respondents) and Millennial Generation (69 respondents). Respondents are dominated by women and all respondents are active in using social media, especially Instagram and TikTok. Most respondents accessed coffee shop content more than three times in the past three months, indicating the high intensity of digital information exposure to coffee consumption behavior.

Evaluation of Measurement Models (Outer Model)

The results of the measurement model test showed that all indicators had an outer loading value of ≥ 0.70 , thus meeting the criteria for convergent validity. Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values of each construct are above 0.70, which indicates good internal consistency. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value of the entire construct is also above 0.50, thus meeting the criteria for discriminant validity. Thus, the research instrument is declared valid and reliable for use in structural model analysis.

Evaluation of Structural Models (Inner Model)

The results of structural model testing using PLS-SEM show that:

1. Brand identity had a positive and significant effect on e-WOM ($\beta = 0.342$; $t = 3.215$; $p < 0.05$).
2. Digital marketing had a positive and significant effect on e-WOM ($\beta = 0.417$; $t = 4.086$; $p < 0.05$).
3. e-WOM had a positive and significant effect on buying interest ($\beta = 0.463$; $t = 5.127$; $p < 0.05$).
4. Brand identity had a positive and significant effect on buying interest ($\beta = 0.238$; $t = 2.174$; $p < 0.05$).
5. Digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on buying interest ($\beta = 0.291$; $t = 2.856$; $p < 0.05$).

All research hypotheses are declared accepted, so that the structural model is declared to be able to explain the relationship between variables empirically.

Discussion

The Influence of Brand Identity on e-WOM

The results of the study show that brand identity has a positive and significant effect on e-WOM. These findings indicate that the stronger and more consistent Petro's Coffee brand identity, the greater the tendency of consumers to share their experiences through digital media. Theoretically, these findings are in line with Aaker (1996) and Keller (2013) who stated that a clear and meaningful brand identity is able to shape consumers' emotional attachment, thereby encouraging voluntary brand advocacy behavior.

In digital marketing practices, brand identity functions as a trigger for consumer conversations in the digital space. An authentic and relevant brand identity makes it easier for consumers to build a narrative when providing reviews or recommendations online. This strengthens the role of brand identity not only as a visual differentiation tool, but also as a foundation for the formation of positive e-WOM.

The Influence of Digital Marketing on e-WOM

The results of the study show that digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on e-WOM. These findings show that effective digital marketing activities, such as content marketing, social media engagement, and two-way interaction, are able to encourage consumers to share their experiences online. This is in line with Sultoni (2025) who stated that the quality of digital content and online experience are important factors in encouraging consumer participation in e-WOM.

In the context of Petro's Coffee, engaging visual content, storytelling relevant to local values, and quick responses to social media admins have been proven to increase consumer interaction, ultimately driving the formation of positive e-WOM.

The Effect of e-WOM on Buying Interest

The test results showed that e-WOM had a positive and significant effect on buying interest. These findings corroborate the theory of Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) and Cheung and Thadani (2012) who stated that e-WOM is a credible source of information for consumers because it comes from the real experience of other users. Consumers tend to trust the reviews and recommendations of fellow consumers more than the company's promotional messages.

In the context of Generation Z and Millennials, the intensity of social media use and dependence on digital recommendations make e-WOM a determining factor in the formation of buying interest. Positive reviews, user-generated content, and recommendations from local

influencers have proven to increase consumers' confidence to visit and buy products at Petro's Coffee.

The Influence of Brand Identity on Buying Interest

The results of the study show that brand identity has a positive and significant effect on buying interest. These findings are in line with Keller (2013) and Kapferer (2012) who stated that a strong and consistent brand identity is able to form positive brand associations and reduce the risk of consumer perception in purchasing decision-making. Consumers tend to choose brands whose identities align with their values and self-image.

In the context of Petro's Coffee, a brand identity that uplifts the value of Sidikalang's coffee locality, consistent visual design, and authentic shop atmosphere have proven to increase consumer interest in visiting and purchasing.

The Influence of Digital Marketing on Buying Interest

The results of the study also show that digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on buying interest. These findings are in line with Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) and Kotler and Keller (2021) who stated that digital marketing is able to increase brand awareness, trust, and perception of product value, which ultimately drives consumer buying interest.

In practice, Petro's Coffee's digital marketing through Instagram and TikTok not only serves as a means of promotion, but also as a two-way communication medium that builds an emotional connection with consumers. Creative visual content, locality-based storytelling, and responsive interactions have been proven to increase consumer engagement and strengthen buying interest.

The Role of e-WOM Mediation

This research shows that e-WOM acts as a partial mediator in the relationship between digital marketing and purchasing decisions. This means that digital marketing not only influences purchasing decisions directly, but also through the formation of positive e-WOM. These findings are consistent with Armawan and Denisya (2023) and Ismagilova et al. (2023) who stated that e-WOM strengthens the influence of digital communication on consumer behavior because it is considered more authentic and credible. In the context of Generation Z and Millennials, recommendations from friends, local influencers, and user-generated content have a significant role in shaping perceptions and purchasing decisions. Therefore, the digital marketing strategy of coffee MSMEs needs to be directed not only at product promotion, but also at creating positive experiences that encourage consumers to share their experiences voluntarily.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the research, it can be concluded that brand identity acts as a differentiating identity for MSME coffee shops through elements such as brand names, logos, designs, packaging, and communication styles. For Generation Z and Millennials, brand identity is not only visual, but also represents values, lifestyle, and self-image. A consistent, authentic, and relevant brand identity is able to build emotional closeness, encourage purchases, and trigger recommendations through digital media.

Digital marketing is the main means to reach Generation Z and Millennials, especially through platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Engaging visual content, powerful storytelling, and two-way interaction create personalized digital experiences and increase consumer engagement, ultimately driving the formation of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM). The synergy between brand identity and digital marketing allows MSME coffee shops to create a consistent brand experience online and offline, thereby increasing buying interest and consumer loyalty

Advice

Coffee MSMEs, especially Petro's Coffee, are advised to build a clear and consistent brand identity, starting from the brand name, logo, interior design, packaging, to communication style on social media. This consistency is important so that the brand is easily recognized and remembered by consumers, especially Generation Z and Millennials. In addition, businesses need to increase two-way interaction with consumers through commentary, direct messaging, live streaming, and interactive content to create a more personalized digital experience and increase closeness between brands and consumers.

Further research is suggested to expand the research context not only on MSME coffee shops, but also on other creative or culinary industry sectors. This aims to test the consistency of brand identity theory and digital marketing in influencing buying interest in different contexts.

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