Viral Social Media Marketing: Consumer Perception and Market Competition Among Selected Skincare Consumers in the Philippines

Marderick M. Presto

College of Business Administration- Graduate Studies Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Sta. Mesa Manila, Philippines

Abstract

Viral social media marketing (VSM) is increasingly used in the Philippine skincare industry, leveraging influencer endorsements, live-stream commerce, and promotional campaigns to engage consumers rapidly. However, its long-term effects on consumer trust and market dynamics remain unclear. This qualitative study analyzed the experiences of 21 Filipino skincare consumers (ages 18–45) via focus groups and in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis revealed key insights: Influencer authenticity, transparent product information, and actual efficacy are critical for converting viral buzz into loyalty. In contrast, promotions and trends (e.g. discounts, "buy one get one" deals, hashtags) can generate short-term trials but often lead only to ephemeral engagement. Participants noted that viral popularity typically spiked quickly and faded unless brands sustained interest through follow-up innovation or community engagement. We also observed strong age-related differences: younger consumers were driven by trendiness and social proof, whereas older consumers prized credibility and evidence. Overall, Filipino skincare buyers responded enthusiastically to engaging content but remained discerning and skeptical, indicating that VSM's power is mediated by trust. The findings suggest that brands should pair viral campaigns with genuine quality and transparent communication to build a lasting market presence. **Implications** include guiding marketers on influencer selection, promotion strategies, and audience segmentation and informing researchers about VSM's role in consumer decision processes.

Keywords: Viral social media marketing, consumer perception, market competition, influencer marketing, Philippine skincare industry.

Introduction

Social media has fundamentally transformed how brands reach consumers. In the Philippines, a famously connected nation, about 86.75 million people (≈73% of the population) were on social media in 2024. Filipinos spend nearly 3.5 hours per day on social media, one of the highest rates globally. This high penetration means viral campaigns can rapidly gain massive reach. Philippine skincare companies have capitalized on this trend, deploying Viral Social Media Marketing (VSM) tactics—including influencer endorsements on Instagram and TikTok, interactive live-stream selling events, and loyalty giveaways—to capture consumer attention. Throughout 2022–2023, numerous viral phenomena in Philippine skincare captured public attention, from overnight selling "TikTok serums" to celebrity-endorsed face creams flooding Facebook feeds. Industry reports suggest that such campaigns can lead to short-term sell-outs,

but companies wonder how lasting those effects are. By drawing on consumer stories, our research sheds light on the mechanics behind these phenomena. In doing so, it contributes to a growing dialogue on the ethics and effectiveness of digital marketing in emerging economies.

Influencer marketing is especially prominent. Social media influencers (SMIs) have become key opinion leaders; research shows consumers often see them as more credible than traditional celebrities. For instance, Lou and Yuan (2019) found that influencer campaigns were "reliable and robust in influencing consumers' attitudes" compared to celebrity ads. Filipino skincare brands invest heavily in influencer content, leveraging SMIs' relatability to target young consumers. However, the allure of virality also raises questions about sustainability. VSM often produces immediate sales spikes, but whether these translate into lasting loyalty and competitive advantage is uncertain. Aral and Walker (2010) found that viral marketing can drive short-term sales uplifts, but its effect on long-term customer retention is unclear. Similarly, Castillo et al. (2022) noted that beauty influencers strongly influence Filipino consumers, yet building a stable brand following is challenging. Anecdotally, local entrepreneurs report that some viral products skyrocket overnight but fade as quickly as they rose.

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) also shaped this landscape. With lockdowns and social distancing, more Filipinos turned to online shopping and virtual communities. Some participants reflected that only recently (during pandemic restrictions) did they start following beauty influencers regularly. This suggests that VSM's rise owes partly to pandemic-driven digital shifts, which accelerated e-commerce adoption and social media engagement. Skincare trends in the Philippines also reflect cultural values (e.g. a strong demand for products promising "fairer" or "brighter" skin) that are often amplified on social platforms. For example, the popularity of viral whitening lotions suggests a convergence of historical beauty standards with modern marketing. While our study does not focus on cultural factors per se, it is important to note that VSM operates within this local beauty narrative.

Theoretically, several models frame our investigation. Rogers' *Diffusion of Innovations* explains how new ideas spread; viral marketing accelerates diffusion, but rapid spread can lead to quick market saturation. Social influence theory (Asch, 1955; Festinger, 1954) suggests individuals tend to follow group norms; in VSM, widely endorsed trends can become self-reinforcing. The Consumer Perception Theory (Howard & Sheth, 1969) posits that vivid marketing stimuli (visual storytelling, narratives) shape beliefs even before trial. In VSM, an influencer's story and product imagery set high expectations. This can create pitfalls: consumers react negatively if products fail to meet hyped claims. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) adds that low-involvement consumers rely on peripheral cues (like an influencer's attractiveness), while high-involvement consumers scrutinize content. We see echoes of this: younger participants often focused on influencers' images, whereas older participants looked for concrete evidence. Finally, social proof (Cialdini, 2009) and parasocial relationships are relevant: consumers increasingly trust peer reviews and community feedback. In a digitally connected market, recommendations from friends or other users can amplify or undermine VSM efforts.

This study addresses these questions by qualitatively examining how VSM strategies influence Filipino skincare consumers' perceptions and behaviors, and how these perceptions intersect with competitive dynamics. We explore How *consumers respond to influencer endorsements, live-stream events, and viral promotions? What cues (trust signals, quality indicators, etc.) guide their acceptance or skepticism?* And *how do these perceptions affect product longevity and brand positioning?* By co-authoring this narrative with consumers, we derive actionable insights for marketing theory and practice locally.

Our key research questions were:

1. How do consumers respond to influencer endorsements, live-stream promotions, and viral social media campaigns?
2. What signals (trust factors, quality cues, promotional offers, etc.) influence their acceptance or skepticism of VSM content?
3. How do these perceptions affect product longevity, brand loyalty, and competitive positioning in the skincare market?

By focusing on consumers' lived experiences, this study aims to bridge the gap between quantitative metrics (likes, shares, sales figures) and the qualitative reality of trust and motivation in digital word-of-mouth.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was adopted to explore consumers' lived experiences with VSM. Twenty-one Filipino skincare consumers (18–45 years old) were purposively sampled based on active use of social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) and prior purchases of products found via influencers or viral promotions. Participants were recruited via online advertisements and referrals, ensuring a mix of students, young professionals, and mid-career adults.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Age	18–45 years (Philippine citizens)	Under 18 or over 45
Social Media Use	Regular users of Facebook/Instagram/TikTok for skincare content	Non-users of these platforms
Purchasing History	Has bought skincare products via influencer marketing or VSM campaigns	No purchase influenced by VSM

Table 1. Participant inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Data were collected from October to December 2024 in Metro Manila. We conducted four focus group discussions (FGDs, 5–6 participants each) and two in-depth interviews (~60 minutes each). The FGDs were stratified by demographic to encourage open discussion: (1) female professionals, (2) male professionals, (3) mixed young professionals, and (4) college students. Participants were fluent in Taglish (a mix of Filipino and English), which was used in discussions to ensure comfort. Focus group facilitators were experienced qualitative researchers not affiliated with any skincare brands, to minimize bias. Sessions began with introductions and general questions about skincare routines to warm up the group. We even had participants enact viral ads to break the ice. Field notes recorded non-verbal cues (e.g. laughter, disbelief) for contextual insight. Meals and snacks were provided to create a relaxed atmosphere. The semi-structured discussion guide covered:

- **Influencer Credibility:** How do you judge an influencer's trustworthiness?
- **Product Quality Cues:** Which attributes (packaging, ingredients, certifications) suggest quality?
- **Promotional Appeals:** What do you think of discounts, bundles, or contests?
- **Viral Brand Experiences:** Can you recall a skincare product that became viral? What did you do?
- **Brand Loyalty:** Do you continue buying products after the hype fades, or do you switch?

Open-ended questions (e.g., "What makes an influencer's recommendation believable?") allowed participants to share freely. Probing (e.g., "Can you give an example?") elicited depth. Before data collection, a pilot FGD (with two volunteers) tested the guide; minor wording adjustments were made, but

all topics were relevant. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim (in original language). Transcripts were cross-checked against recordings, and participants were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., "FGD2_P3") to protect identity.

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. First, researchers immersed themselves in transcripts by reading repeatedly. Next, they generated open codes (e.g. "scripted influencer," "value deal," "FOMO buying"). Codes were then collated into candidate themes (e.g. "Trust in Influencers," "Rewards vs. Loyalty"). Themes were reviewed and refined: for instance, initial separate codes for "expertise" and "training" were merged under a broader credibility theme. Two analysts independently coded the first two transcripts and resolved discrepancies, achieving over 90% agreement. NVivo software (QSR International) was used to organize codes. We also checked code frequency: "trust" and "authentic" were frequent terms in influencer discussions, confirming theme prominence. Member-checking was employed by sharing summary findings with two participants, who confirmed the themes reflected their perspectives, enhancing trustworthiness.

Several strategies enhanced credibility. The primary analyst maintained a reflexive journal to note biases. Triangulation was achieved by combining FGDs (which elicited group consensus) and interviews (for personal stories). We continued data collection until saturation: by the fourth FGD and final interview, no new major themes emerged. Ethical protocols were strictly followed: the Polytechnic University of the Philippines Ethics Review Board approved the study. Participants provided written informed consent and could withdraw at any time. To thank them, each received a certificate of appreciation and light refreshments.

Results

Overall, participants were highly aware of viral skincare trends. Each group could recall at least one "viral sensation," indicating that VSM is at the top of the mind. All participants readily shared examples of recent viral products, suggesting these campaigns successfully penetrated public consciousness. This pervasive exposure set the stage for detailed discussions of trust and authenticity.

Seven major themes emerged from the analysis (Table 2). Below, we elaborate on each with illustrative quotes.

Table 2. Summary of Themes and Key Findings.

Theme	Key Findings
Trust in Influencers	Authentic, personable endorsements (unscripted, experienced influencers) build credibility; scripted or clearly paid posts erode trust. Disclosure (#ad tags) and influencer transparency enhance trust.
Perceived Quality	Transparent information (ingredients, certifications) and real results determine satisfaction. Attractive packaging and hype attract trials, but actual efficacy must deliver value. Ethical branding cues (e.g., cruelty-free) can help initially.
Promotions vs. Loyalty	Discounts and freebies drive immediate trial but not loyalty. Deal-savvy consumers often wait for sales. Overuse of promotions can shift focus from product quality to price.
Virality & Trends	Viral campaigns generate rapid spikes in awareness and trial, but buzz fades quickly unless novelty and quality are sustained. Too many similar trends lead to "fatigue"; follow-up innovation is crucial.

Competition & Saturation	In a crowded market, copying the same viral tactics yields diminishing returns. When multiple brands use identical strategies, consumers become desensitized. Standout success requires unique positioning beyond hype.
Live Selling	Engages and excites younger, interactive audiences (real-time Q&A and entertainment value), but older consumers often find it repetitive or tiring. Effectiveness depends on the host's charisma and added credibility cues (e.g., expert guests).
Age-Group Behaviors	Gen Z (18–24) driven by FOMO and peer influence, leading to impulsive, trend-driven buys. Older consumers (35+) process messages more deliberately: they prioritize evidence (e.g., doctor endorsements) and loyalty to known brands. Younger buyers often treat trends as social phenomena; older buyers value established track records.

Trust in Influencer Marketing: Across all groups, influencer credibility was paramount. Scripted or overly polished endorsements immediately raised suspicions. As one focus group member said, *"Kung mukhang scripted lang yung endorsement, hindi niya ako ma-sway."* ("If an endorsement looks scripted, it won't sway me."). Participants reported mentally tuning out at the first sign of a sales pitch. They preferred influencers speaking naturally, as if talking to a friend, and they mocked canned lines in their responses. Several even mimicked aggressive sales pitches during discussions to emphasize how off-putting they found them.

Conversely, perceived expertise and sincerity boosted trust. Respondents noted that recommendations felt credible when influencers had relevant credentials or real experience. For example, a pharmacist-participant said she trusted an influencer with a medical background more than a fashion blogger. A woman in her 30s noted she subscribed to a dermatologist's vlog because *"mas nagtitiwala ako sa mga dermatologist na nagre-review ng products."* ("I trust dermatologists reviewing products more."). Others preferred influencers who had faced similar skin concerns themselves, saying they felt those influencers "really know our struggles." Transparent disclosures also helped: many appreciated when posts were openly tagged #ad, seeing it as honesty. One student said hidden sponsorships make her *"nagdududa agad, pero kapag malinaw [ang sponsorship], mas pinagkakatiwalaan."* (think right away, but when sponsorship is clear, I trust more).

Interestingly, participants frequently described forming parasocial bonds with influencers—feeling they "know" them personally. They treated trusted influencers like friends giving advice. This resonates with the concept of parasocial relationships, where consumers see influencers as virtual buddies. Many participants said they follow an influencer's journey and feel a sense of camaraderie. This emotional connection made recommendations more powerful: one young woman sighed, "Kapag sinabi ng kaibigan ko, bibili ako. Kasi feeling ko kaibigan ko na siya." ("If my friend says it, I'll buy it. Because I feel like she's my friend.")

In sum, consumers require authenticity and transparency from influencers. A genuine demeanor and demonstrable expertise were non-negotiable. As one participant put it, *"Mas depende sa feel kong mapagkakatiwalaan ko yung tao sa video."* ("It depends on whether I feel I can trust the person in the video.") These insights echo prior studies: influencer trustworthiness is known to enhance persuasion significantly. Consumers here acted as active gatekeepers, quickly filtering out anything that smelled of a hard sell.

Perceived Product Quality: Once influenced to try a product, participants evaluated its quality through cues. Initial interest was often sparked by packaging and branding. For example, one college student observed, *"Kapag maganda yung packaging, nagkakaroon agad ng mataas na tingin sa quality."* ("When the packaging is attractive, you immediately think the quality is high."). Glossy designs, appealing colors, and professional logos gave products a "premium feel." In one FGD, members even shared photos of eye-catching bottles they had seen, noting how design can first capture attention.

In addition to looks, product narratives (ingredients and values) piqued interest. Products marketed as organic, cruelty-free, or locally made garnered positive reactions. For example, a participant recalled seeing a "Filipino artisanal serum" that emphasized traditional ingredients—this narrative *made her curious.* She said, "Na-appreciate ko yung story na galing sa amin—iba yung dating." ("I appreciated the story that it came from our culture—it felt different.") Such brand stories built initial goodwill; however, participants immediately noted that the narrative alone was insufficient if results fell short.

However, they quickly moved beyond surface cues. Consumers demanded transparency: clear ingredient lists, certifications, and realistic claims. Several said they would pause an influencer's video to check ingredients on their phone if something sounded too good to be true. Official seals (e.g. "Dermatologist tested", "Halal certified") served as trust signals. As one said, *"Kapag nakita kong may certifications o 'dermatology-tested' sa label, mas nagiging credible."* ("If I see certifications or a 'dermatology-tested' label, it becomes more credible."). This behavior reflects signaling theory: third-party endorsements reduce uncertainty. Consumers viewed these as proof that the product might be worth trying.

Crucially, actual performance was decisive. Nearly every participant stated that tangible results (clearer skin, fewer pimples, brighter complexion) were the real proof of quality. A focus group member summarized, *"Kapag nakita kong may pagbabago sa skin ko, satisfied ako."* ("If I see changes in my skin, I am satisfied."). Respondents described treating viral products as experiments: they would use a product for a week or two and then judge it. If it lived up to the hype—say, reducing blemishes—then loyalty followed; if not, the item was abandoned.

These behaviors align with classic marketing theory. Zeithaml (1988) noted that consumers use extrinsic and intrinsic cues to infer quality. In our context, influencer hype and packaging (extrinsic cues) got products into customers ' hands, but intrinsic proof (efficacy) determined whether customers stuck around. In practice, participants said they saw VSM primarily as a discovery tool: it got them to try products, but product performance determined repurchase. As one put it, *"Ang viral marketing parang pang-promo lang. Kung ayaw mo yung effect, aba, ayaw mo pa rin kahit malaking discount."* ("Viral marketing seems just like a promotion. If I do not like the effect, I still will not buy it even with a big discount.") This pragmatic stance suggests that trust in signals matters only until experience intervenes.

Reward-Based Promotions and Loyalty: Participants had nuanced views on promotional tactics. Across all groups, they agreed that discounts, bundles, and freebies are effective hooks for initial purchases. For example, one young woman exclaimed, *"Buy-one-take-one madalas akong mahuhumaling kasi pakiramdam ko nakakatipid ako."* ("Buy-one-take-one often hooks me because it feels like I'm saving money."). Bundle deals and flash sales were described as exciting – some participants said they would share such deals on social media to help friends save, turning promotions into social events.

However, several drawbacks emerged. Participants noted that frequent promotions train consumers to wait for deals. Many admitted they rarely paid full price anymore, preferring to postpone purchases until a discount came. One joked that a friend "naging sales advisor" to each other, exchanging alerts on upcoming promotions. Contest-based promotions (e.g., Instagram quizzes for prizes) initially generated

buzz, but some found them tedious or annoying. A student complained that filling out repeated quiz entries for a chance to win a gift card felt like "wasting time and giving away my personal info". This suggests that gamified promotions must balance effort and payoff to avoid frustration.

Emotions around promotions were mixed. Most participants enjoyed the thrill of "winning" a deal and felt smart about saving money. Yet others felt slight remorse or anxiety, worrying they might regret buying without a discount. One respondent admitted regretting a last-minute purchase when a better sale appeared days later. Some turned promotions into collaborative activities: for example, pooling money with friends to meet a free-shipping threshold on a viral makeup kit.

Importantly, nearly everyone agreed that promotions drive trials but not necessarily loyalty. They repeatedly observed, *"Kung okay yung produkto, babalik ako kahit walang sale. Pero kung hindi, kahit sale, edi ayaw ko."* ("If the product is good, I'll buy again even without a sale. But if it's not good, even a sale, I won't buy.") This mirrors sales-promotion literature: Chandon et al. (2000) note that deals spike sales in the short-term but do not create baseline demand. Our consumers' logic was that promotions put them in the store (online or offline), but the product had to do its job to win repeat business. As one marketing professional participant summed up, *"lahat ng promo lumalabas pa rin yung quality pa rin yung nagtitili sa akin."* ("No matter the promos, quality is what sticks with me.")

Impact of Virality on Brand Longevity: A clear pattern was that viral success tends to be short-lived unless actively sustained. Participants described the typical lifecycle of a viral product: a sudden surge in buzz (often via a catchy post or hashtag), a flurry of impulse buys, followed by a rapid decline once novelty wears off. As one student explained, *"'Boom siya for a month, tapos wala na.'"* ("It boomed for a month, then it was gone.") Many provided recent examples: a brightening serum that "every mother in our Facebook group was using" one week but forgotten the next; an anti-aging cream that "TikTok-famous" last spring and now gathering dust in their drawers.

This "boom-and-bust" cycle resembles a fashion fad or pop-up trend: exciting and widespread one moment, forgotten the next. It echoes Berger and Milkman (2012), who noted that viral content can spark broad attention but sustaining interest requires ongoing novelty. Participants confirmed this: once a product's novelty faded or it failed to exceed expectations, people moved on quickly. Several explicitly said they felt "trend fatigue," explaining that after seeing dozens of similar "miracle products," they now approach new launches skeptically.

Some also observed algorithmic effects: platforms seem to accelerate new trends and then deprioritize older ones, making yesterday's viral posts vanish from feeds. Psychologically, one participant said, *"Feeling ko na-bombard ako with trending products; pag nag-trending ulit bago ko pa masulit, hinahanap ko na lang next."* ("I feel bombarded by trending products; when a new one trends before I get to try the last one, I move on.") High expectations played a role too: products that go viral set a very high bar, so if they didn't work miracles, disappointment was magnified. A student noted feeling *"bitin"* (unfulfilled) when a popular serum only delivered minor improvements despite rave reviews.

Consumers did suggest strategies to extend a product's online life. They praised brands that innovated post-launch: one beauty blogger mentioned that a mask she loved went viral, and its brand then released matching serums and toners, which kept buzz alive. In contrast, products that "just disappeared" after one campaign were quickly forgotten. As one participant put it, *"Para kang nanonood ng teleserye—kailangan may next episode o mag-drop ng bagong content para bumalik ako."* ("It's like watching a TV series— you need to have a next episode or drop new content for me to return.") This implies that brands should

treat a viral spike as just the beginning: follow-up engagement (new formulations, challenges, or community events) is needed to maintain momentum.

Market Competition and Saturation: The crowded Philippine skincare market amplifies these dynamics. Participants noted that as soon as one brand's viral tactic succeeded, others rushed to copy it. One group discussed how a small brand's giveaway on TikTok prompted dozens of others to run similar spin-to-win contests. This saturation meant consumers often saw the same type of campaign from many brands simultaneously. The effect was "campaign overload." Participants said they began to reflexively ignore repetitive content. For example, one said she now scrolls past anything starting with a countdown or lottery wheel, having seen it countless times from different sellers.

This saturation effect supports findings by Godes and Mayzlin (2004): when many brands disseminate identical messages, each message's impact diminishes. In practice, participants reported that claimed "As seen on TikTok/IG" badges became meaningless after 20 products use them. They became highly comparative: if a deal looked the same across brands, they would switch to whichever had better reviews or extra freebies.

Participants also noted disparities between large and small players. Some observed that big multinational companies could sustain hype through big budgets and multiple channels, while smaller local brands had to lean on authenticity or niche angles to survive. One local entrepreneur in the group described feeling overshadowed: *"Kapag viral yung pinakabantog na brand, parang lahat na nasa highlight feed."* ("When the most famous brand goes viral, it feels like they occupy the entire highlight feed.") Yet others pointed out that independent brands could become beloved "underdogs" by being more responsive (e.g. personally replying to comments) and by emphasizing local identity.

Overall, competition gives consumers choices but also demands differentiation. Participants said successful brands were those that didn't just ride the hype but continued to engage (through contests, product drops, or community building). In contrast, brands that "only cared about the hype" and then went silent were quickly forgotten. In a sense, the social media environment was seen as Darwinian: only the adaptable (continually innovating) brands survived the constant trend changes.

Perceptions of Live Selling: Live-stream commerce—where hosts demonstrate and sell products in real-time video—emerged as a notable VSM channel with mixed reception. Younger, tech-savvy participants generally enjoyed live selling. They treated it as entertainment and appreciated the interactivity. As one college student said, *"Mas gusto ko yung interactive, tapos pwede ka mag-comment agad."* ("I like that it's interactive and I can comment immediately."). They enjoyed instant responses to questions ("If I ask a review question, sometimes the influencer tries the product on live"), live demos, and the communal feel (viewers cheering each other on). Some even likened it to watching a beauty talk show with friends.

In contrast, older participants (late 30s and above) were more skeptical of live selling. Many found it repetitive or tiring to watch for long stretches. One working mother said, *"Nakakapagod manood ng live selling, lalo na kung paulit-ulit lang ang sinasabi."* ("It's tiring to watch live selling, especially if they keep repeating the same things."). Others noted minor technical issues (lag, loud background music) or worried about impulse buying. Several in this group preferred to "hear about products secondhand" (e.g. through friends or recorded reviews) rather than watch live. They appreciated that some live sessions are later uploaded so they could watch highlights on their own time.

Overall, live selling was seen as highly engaging for younger audiences due to its real-time spontaneity, but was a "niche" channel for others. The effectiveness seemed to depend greatly on the presenter's style (energy, credibility) and the format. One senior participant suggested that having credible guests (like

dermatologists) occasionally appear in live streams could make older viewers more comfortable. It was clear that live selling should be one tool among many: for instance, one participant mentioned that she discovered a product on live video but then researched it further online before purchasing.

Purchasing Behavior Across Age Groups: Strong generational differences emerged throughout the themes. Gen Z consumers (roughly ages 18–24 in our sample) were highly motivated by social proof and FOMO (fear of missing out). They often made impulse purchases to fit in with trends and online peer groups. This aligns with research linking high FoMO to social media-driven buying. Many Gen Z participants admitted following challenges (e.g. TikTok skincare routines) and encouraging friends to join. They viewed buying trending products as part of social identity and community belonging.

Young professionals (mid-20s to mid-30s) took a more balanced approach. They still engaged with influencer content and viral hype, but paired it with personal research and deliberation. Many said they might see a product on an influencer's story, then check comments or watch additional reviews before deciding. They considered factors like price and necessity, and often waited a short "trial period" (two weeks, one month) to see if the product worked before repurchasing. One respondent noted that at her age she's *"mas practical"* and won't buy every trend, but she appreciates a good deal on something she actually needs.

Older consumers (35–45) approached VSM even more cautiously. They may be aware of viral products through social media or younger relatives, but their purchase decisions relied heavily on offline cues. Several said they would only buy a product if it had been recommended by a trusted source offline (like a dermatologist friend) or if it came from an established brand. They also valued consistency; once a brand proved itself, they became repeat buyers. Notably, older participants exhibited less impulse and more inertia: they might try a trending item once, but if it disappointed, they stuck with the products they already knew.

In summary, age cohorts differed in motivation and decision strategy. Younger buyers (Gen Z) were influenced by social dynamics and emotional appeals, often taking low-risk gambles on hype. Older buyers valued expertise and evidence, adopting new products only when fully convinced. Marketing strategies should thus be calibrated: use fast-paced, shareable campaigns with social proof for younger audiences, and provide more detailed, authority-backed information for older segments. Segmented approaches can ensure VSM content resonates effectively across the spectrum.

- **Gen Z (18–24):** Highly influenced by peers and influencers. Motivated by trends and FOMO. Likely to make impulse buys if products are trending. Prefers interactive content (challenges, live Q&A).
- **Young Professionals (25–34):** Socially engaged but deliberate. Uses influencer content as inspiration but cross-checks information. Balances excitement with pragmatism (e.g. comparing prices, reading reviews).
- **Older Adults (35–45):** Cautious and evidence-driven. Prefers reputable sources (doctors, pharmacists) and well-known brands. Notices trends but requires strong proof before switching. Often learns of viral products indirectly (e.g. from family) and then researches further.

These patterns suggest that Filipino consumers, regardless of age, start with viral marketing as an entry point but ultimately rely on a combination of credibility cues and personal judgment. Figure 1 (conceptual) summarizes the interplay: influencer authenticity and product transparency filter viral buzz into trial, and product efficacy then filters trial into loyalty. Without those foundations, even the most viral campaign dissipates.

Table 3. Participant Demographics (N=21).

Age Group (years)	Gender (F/M)	Occupation (examples)	Social Media Usage
18–24	5F, 3M	Students, interns, entry-level workers	High (TikTok, Instagram)
25–34	4F, 4M	Professionals (IT, marketing, engineering)	Moderate (Facebook, IG)
35–45	2F, 3M	Mid-career (teachers, managers, executives)	Moderate (Facebook)

Discussion

This study provides a comprehensive view of how viral social media marketing influences Filipino skincare consumers and market competition. The findings reaffirm several existing theories while highlighting context-specific nuances.

First, influencer credibility emerged as the linchpin of successful VSM. When influencers appeared genuine and knowledgeable, participants reported positive brand perceptions; when influencers seemed disingenuous, trust was lost immediately. This mirrors existing research: Nafees et al. (2021) found that influencer trustworthiness significantly enhances brand credibility, and our data vividly illustrate this principle. The value placed on perceived expertise and consistency also reinforces findings by Kapitan and Silvera (2016) that source expertise boosts persuasive impact. Moreover, many participants indicated that seeing influencers with clear skin or related life experiences created a "halo effect," making products seem more credible. Conversely, repeated exposure to false claims led to skepticism. These patterns confirm that in the era of VSM, *who* delivers the message can be as important as *what* the message is. Influencers effectively become micro-celebrities whose authenticity—and even minor personal details— shape audience reception.

Second, consumers' use of marketing cues aligns with known frameworks. We observed a progression consistent with Howard and Sheth's consumer perception model: extrinsic appeals (packaging, storytelling, social proof) attracted attention, but intrinsic evidence (product performance) defined the final attitude. Zeithaml's (1988) concept of extrinsic vs intrinsic cues was evident: attractive packaging and positive influencer image provided initial confidence, but transparent ingredients and certifications offered informational reassurance. In signaling theory terms, these transparent elements (ingredient lists, test labels) acted as credible signals, reducing perceived risk. However, even the most well-signaled product faltered if it failed to deliver results: intrinsic value ultimately cemented loyalty. The participants' pragmatic view that *"quality determines repeat purchase"* reinforces that VSM should be backed by genuine product value.

Third, the study highlights the pitfalls of relying solely on promotions and hype. Behaviorally, participants became deal-prone: they learned to wait for discounts, aligning with sales promotion literature noting the 'deal-prone consumer' phenomenon. Over time, heavy promotion usage risked conditioning customers to buy only on sale. We also saw elements of cognitive load: too many simultaneous promotions (or contests requiring effort) led to frustration or apathy. This suggests that managers should be cautious: use promotions strategically for customer acquisition but avoid overuse that might erode brand equity. Instead, promotions should be part of a balanced approach investing in product quality and service.

Fourth, the virality dynamic emphasizes that rapid diffusion can be ephemeral. According to diffusion of innovation theory, accelerated adoption via social media can quickly reach early adopters but may stall before mainstream acceptance if interest wanes. Our participants' experiences illustrate that viral campaigns reached consumers fast, but without sustained engagement, they did not become "sticky." This echoes Berger and Milkman (2012), who argue that viral reach is only the first step; sustaining engagement requires continuous novelty or value. Practically, this means firms should view a viral campaign not as a climax but as the initiation of ongoing marketing: follow-up content, product updates, and customer interaction are needed to convert initial buzz into durable awareness.

Fifth, competition and saturation effects are evident. In highly connected markets, traditional models like word-of-mouth take on new dimensions. When many brands echo each other's viral tactics, consumers essentially tune out due to message overload. This finding echoes Godes and Mayzlin (2004): in a saturated information environment, individual messages lose punch. For brands, the takeaway is clear: emulate successfully, but be prepared for diminishing returns. Differentiation becomes critical. Unique value propositions, distinct storytelling, or niche positioning can break through the clutter. Several participants noted that only brands willing to "do something different" recaptured their attention amidst a sea of lookalike campaigns.

The generational differences we found also offer theoretical and practical implications. They illustrate the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) in action: younger, low-involvement consumers were swayed by peripheral cues (influencer charisma, visuals), whereas older, high-involvement consumers demanded stronger central arguments (factual evidence, expert opinions). Practically, this suggests VSM content must be tailored: social, fast-moving, and visually engaging for Gen Z, and more detailed or expert-driven for older segments. This segmentation aligns with studies showing FOMO-driven shopping in youth and higher trust in experts among mature consumers. It also suggests that cross-media strategies (e.g. combining influencer reels with blog posts or infographics) could reach multiple audiences effectively.

Another insight connects to social psychology: consumers are effectively engaging in social proof and comparison. The "marketplace of attention" means people look to others—be it influencers or friends—for purchase cues. Our data reflect Cialdini's social proof; the volume of likes, shares, or comments on a product post increased its credibility in participants' eyes. Similarly, Festinger's social comparison theory (1954) is seen when consumers evaluate their own potential outcomes by comparing to others' results displayed online. These classic concepts prove that even new media tap into fundamental human tendencies.

Implications and Recommendations: For skincare brand managers and marketers, the findings suggest clear strategies:

- **Cultivate authentic influencer partnerships:** Vet influencers carefully for genuine alignment with the product and brand values. Encourage them to communicate candidly (even sharing minor criticisms) rather than reciting scripts. Authentic storytelling builds trust and leverages parasocial connections. Micro-influencers or "real users" can be highly effective due to their relatability.
- **Focus on product excellence and transparency:** Since consumers scrutinize ingredients and claims, ensure product quality through R&D. Highlight credible information (clinical data, full ingredient lists, certifications) in marketing materials. Consider "unboxing" videos or close-up demonstrations to satisfy detail-oriented buyers.

- **Use promotions strategically:** Employ discounts and bundles to attract first-time buyers or launch new items, but avoid making them perpetual. Over-discounting can train customers to wait for deals. Combine promotions with value-adds (free samples, loyalty rewards) that tie back to product experience, reinforcing value over price.
- **Differentiate campaigns:** In a crowded social media landscape, copying rivals leads to fatigue. Craft unique storytelling angles or tap into niche consumer interests (e.g., eco-consciousness, local heritage) to stand out. Innovative content (gamification, user challenges) can generate buzz if not already overused by competitors.
- **Segment content by audience:** Tailor VSM messages to demographic segments. For Gen Z, emphasize shareable, interactive content (hashtag challenges, memes, short-form videos). For older consumers, provide informative content (expert interviews, detailed blog posts, testimonials) that builds credibility. Multi-channel strategies (e.g. pairing an influencer post with a follow-up webinar) can bridge segments.
- **Build community and sustain engagement:** Treat viral campaigns as just the start of a journey. Maintain relationships by engaging with customers post-launch (e.g., social media contests, Q&A sessions, user-generated content features). Encourage feedback and respond promptly—this can extend interest and foster brand loyalty beyond the initial hype.
- **Monitor and adapt:** Keep an eye on market responses and competitor activity. Use analytics to see which content resonates and be ready to pivot. If a trend fizzles, have a plan to quickly introduce new angles or offers to maintain momentum.

Limitations and Future Research: This qualitative study provides in-depth insights but has limitations. The sample (21 urban, social-media-active Filipinos) may not represent all consumers, especially those in rural areas or with limited internet access. The group discussion format might have introduced social desirability bias, with some participants possibly echoing peers. We did mitigate this through individual interviews and facilitator techniques, but it remains a caveat. Also, as a cross-sectional study, it captures perceptions at a single point in time; attitudes may change as both social media and consumer sophistication evolve.

Future research could build on these findings in several ways:

- Conduct large-scale surveys to test the generalizability of these themes across a broader Philippine population, and to quantify the impact of trust, promotions, and demographics on purchase intention.
- Employ longitudinal designs to track how perceptions of viral campaigns evolve (e.g. immediately after exposure vs. weeks later), which would clarify how VSM impacts loyalty over time.
- Test specific messaging effects experimentally (e.g. scripted vs. unscripted influencer videos) to establish causal links between content styles and consumer responses.
- Compare VSM effects across product categories (e.g. makeup, wellness supplements) and cultures, to see which findings are specific to skincare in the Philippines versus universal.

Conclusion

Viral social media marketing is a powerful but not a panacea tool in the Philippine skincare industry. This study shows that while VSM can ignite rapid brand awareness and trial, its lasting impact depends on authenticity and product substance. Filipino consumers respond enthusiastically to engaging, entertaining campaigns but ultimately judge brands on real results and credibility. The contrast between short-term viral buzz and long-term loyalty was clear: a flashy campaign may attract thousands of first-time buyers,

but only those who deliver on promises will retain customers. Every participant in our study was keenly aware of this trade-off.

Key findings include Influencer credibility and transparency are non-negotiable. Promotions and trends can drive trials, but without genuine quality, those customers disappear. Virality often yields a "boom then bust" cycle, requiring brands to follow up with innovation or sustained engagement. In a saturated market, differentiation is crucial: repeated tactics become background noise. Finally, consumer segments differ: Gen Z craves social validation and interactivity, while older buyers seek evidence and reliability.

Overall, viral marketing must be wielded thoughtfully. A campaign's initial reach is meaningless unless it aligns with consumer values and product performance. In an age where social media trends move at breakneck speed, the lasting winners will be those brands that translate viral interest into genuine trust. Ethical storytelling, product transparency, and post-launch engagement are as important as the viral mechanics. In essence, no hype can replace a product's fundamental promise to its consumers—its effectiveness and value.

Ultimately, we underscore that in marketing, as in life, there are no shortcuts to genuine connection and quality. This study provides a roadmap for turning fleeting digital attention into durable relationships. Brands that focus on authenticity and substance can harness the benefits of VSM while building real customer loyalty. For marketers, the lesson is clear: combine the excitement of viral trends with unwavering commitment to product excellence. For scholars, these results highlight the need to study emergent marketing phenomena through a local lens. As technology introduces new forms of "virality," the core message remains: convert initial buzz into trust, and consumers will follow.

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