

Social Media Marketing Strategies for Enhancing Brand Engagement and Purchase Decisions Among Generation Z Consumers

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Abstract

This article examines social media marketing strategies that can strengthen brand engagement and influence purchase decisions among Generation Z consumers. The study uses a qualitative literature review to synthesize findings from twenty scholarly publications on social media marketing activities, consumer brand engagement, influencer marketing, electronic word-of-mouth, brand trust, and Generation Z purchasing behavior. The synthesis indicates that effective strategies are not limited to promotional exposure; they depend on the quality of interaction created between consumers, content, influencers, and brands. Five strategic dimensions emerge as particularly important: entertaining and interactive content, authentic and informative storytelling, credible influencer partnerships, user-generated and peer-to-peer content, and personalized social commerce experiences. Brand engagement functions as a central mechanism through which social media activities are translated into stronger attitudes, trust, brand preference, and purchase intentions. The literature also shows that credibility and authenticity are increasingly important because Generation Z consumers evaluate commercial messages through social comparison, peer communication, and perceived relational closeness. Accordingly, brands should move from one-way promotional communication toward participatory, transparent, and community-oriented strategies. The article proposes an integrated strategic framework in which social media marketing activities stimulate cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement, which subsequently supports purchase decisions. Future research should test the framework across platforms, product categories, cultures, and longitudinal consumer journeys.

Keywords

Generation Z; Social Media Marketing; Brand Engagement; Influencer Marketing; Purchase Decision; e-WOM.



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INTRODUCTION

Social media has transformed marketing from a primarily firm-controlled communication process into an interactive environment in which brands, consumers, creators, and peer networks jointly shape market meaning. Social networking platforms provide marketers with opportunities to distribute content, stimulate conversations, build communities, and obtain immediate feedback. Consequently, the strategic value of social media is no longer limited to reach or advertising exposure; it increasingly concerns the

ability to create meaningful consumer-brand relationships and to convert interaction into behavioral outcomes (Appel et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Generation Z represents an especially important audience in this environment because its consumption journey is deeply embedded in digital and social experiences. Rather than relying exclusively on conventional advertising, younger consumers often encounter products through short-form videos, influencers, user-generated content, peer recommendations, reviews, and social commerce interfaces. Research on Generation Z indicates that social media communication can influence shopping intention through trust, participation, electronic word-of-mouth, perceived brand quality, and brand preference rather than through exposure alone

The concept of consumer brand engagement is therefore central to understanding why some social media campaigns produce stronger outcomes than others. Hollebeek et al. (2014) conceptualize consumer brand engagement as a multidimensional state involving consumers' cognitive processing, affection, and activation in interactions with brands. Engagement can take the form of reading and thinking about brand content, expressing positive feelings, commenting, sharing, creating content, recommending products, or participating in brand communities. Its importance is reinforced by research showing that engagement-related antecedents can contribute to brand loyalty and other relationship outcomes (Leckie et al., 2016).

Earlier research on social media marketing activities identified entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word-of-mouth as important dimensions of perceived social media marketing (Kim & Ko, 2012). Subsequent studies demonstrated that social media marketing efforts can strengthen brand equity and consumer responses (Godey et al., 2016). These findings suggest that a successful strategy should combine functional value with relational and experiential value.

At the same time, the growth of influencer marketing has added a powerful interpersonal dimension to social media strategy. Influencers may serve as opinion leaders whose recommendations reduce information uncertainty and provide consumers with socially meaningful product cues (Casaló et al., 2020). Credibility and parasocial interaction have also been linked to purchase intention (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), while authenticity remains critical because audiences can become skeptical when commercial partnerships appear inconsistent with an influencer's identity or usual content (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Despite the large body of research, an integrated strategic explanation is still useful because social media marketing contains multiple mechanisms operating simultaneously. Content quality may generate attention; interaction may generate engagement; credible sources may create trust; peer communication may strengthen social proof; and these

processes may collectively influence purchase decisions. Recent Generation Z research confirms the importance of this chain, including the mediating role of brand awareness, consumer engagement, trust, and purchase intention (Pratiwi et al., 2025; Astuti et al., 2025). Therefore, this article aims to synthesize the literature and formulate practical social media marketing strategies for enhancing brand engagement and purchase decisions among Generation Z consumers.

METHODS

This article employed a qualitative literature review approach. Twenty scholarly publications were selected to provide a focused synthesis of research on social media marketing activities, consumer brand engagement, influencer marketing, electronic word-of-mouth, Generation Z, and purchase intention or purchase behavior. The reviewed studies included conceptual papers, empirical studies, and a meta-analysis published in established journals between 2012. The selection emphasized studies that directly explained either the mechanisms through which social media marketing creates consumer responses or the characteristics of Generation Z as a social-media-oriented consumer group.

The analysis was conducted thematically. First, the literature was organized around major constructs, including social media marketing activities, engagement, credibility, authenticity, influencer effects, peer communication, brand trust, brand awareness, and purchase intention. Second, recurring relationships among these constructs were compared across studies. Third, the findings were synthesized into strategic dimensions that can be translated into managerial practice. The approach follows the logic of literature-based synthesis rather than statistical meta-analysis; consequently, the article does not claim to estimate a pooled causal effect.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Social Media Marketing Strategies and Generation Z Engagement

The literature indicates that Generation Z's purchase journey is increasingly social, visual, interactive, and continuous. Consumers can move rapidly from discovery to evaluation and purchase within digital environments, making social media not merely a promotional channel but part of the consumer decision process itself. Consumption-related peer communication is associated with online shopping intention among Gen Z, while perceived brand quality and brand preference can operate as important mechanisms in this process (Le & Ngoc, 2024). Research on social media marketing also shows that entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word-of-mouth are important dimensions of perceived social media marketing activities (Kim & Ko, 2012), and that these activities can strengthen brand equity and consumer responses (Godey et al., 2016).

For this reason, effective content for Generation Z should combine entertainment,

information, and participation. Short-form video, interactive polls, quizzes, challenges, live sessions, product demonstrations, and remixable content can transform passive viewers into active participants. Hollebeek et al. (2014) explain that consumer brand engagement contains cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Accordingly, campaign evaluation should extend beyond views toward meaningful indicators such as comments, saves, shares, completion rates, conversations, and community participation. Personalization can further improve relevance when it is transparent and useful, while excessive repetition or intrusive targeting may weaken trust.

Authenticity is particularly important in this environment. Audrezet et al. (2020) demonstrate that commercial partnerships can create authenticity tensions when they conflict with an influencer's expected identity or intrinsic motivation. For brands, this means that storytelling should explain the product's value, purpose, use, and evidence while remaining consistent with the brand identity. Lou and Yuan (2019) show the importance of message value and credibility in generating trust in branded content. Thus, Generation Z-oriented content should balance emotional storytelling with verifiable product information, demonstrations, customer experiences, and transparent disclosure of commercial relationships.

Influencer Credibility, User-Generated Content, and Social Proof

Influencer marketing provides an interpersonal layer to social media strategy because influencers function as sources of information, interpretation, and social recommendation. Casaló et al. (2020) found that originality and uniqueness contribute to opinion leadership on Instagram and that opinion leadership can influence intentions to follow advice. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) similarly identified positive relationships between influencer credibility, parasocial interaction, and purchase intention. More broadly, Ao et al. (2023), through a meta-analysis of 62 studies, found that influencer characteristics including expertise, trustworthiness, credibility, congruence, entertainment, informativeness, and attractiveness are associated with engagement and purchase intention, with credibility particularly important for purchase intention. Evidence focused on Gen Z also indicates that source credibility and influencer inspiration can positively affect purchase intention, while parasocial interaction can strengthen the relationship between credibility and purchase intention (Babu et al., 2024).

These findings suggest that influencer selection should prioritize audience fit, expertise, credibility, and authenticity rather than follower count alone. Micro- and niche-influencers may be strategically valuable when their communities are closely aligned with the product category. At the same time, user-generated content and electronic word-of-mouth can provide social proof that firm-created advertising cannot easily replicate. Reviews, testimonials, unboxing videos, customer stories, comments, and peer

recommendations help prospective buyers reduce uncertainty. Onofrei et al. (2022) found that social media interactions can affect source credibility, homophily, content quality, purchase intention, and behavioral engagement.

A strong UGC strategy therefore creates a cycle in which existing customers produce content, prospective consumers use that content for evaluation, new customers make purchases, and those customers subsequently become new content contributors. Pratiwi et al. (2025) found that UGC and influencer activity can influence purchase intention through brand awareness. This reinforces the view that social proof should be managed as a strategic asset. Brands should encourage authentic customer stories, community hashtags, product challenges, reposting, and post-purchase advocacy while maintaining quality control and avoiding practices that make consumer-generated content appear artificially manufactured.

Brand Trust, Purchase Decisions, and an Integrated Strategic Framework

The reviewed literature indicates that social media marketing influences purchase decisions through several intermediate psychological and relational mechanisms. Consumer brand engagement provides an important bridge between social media activity and downstream outcomes because engagement reflects consumers' cognitive processing, emotional responses, and behavioral activation toward brands (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Leckie et al. (2016) further emphasize the relationship between engagement antecedents and brand loyalty. Recent studies also identify brand awareness, brand trust, participation, and electronic word-of-mouth as important mechanisms connecting social media marketing with purchase intention (Pratiwi et al., 2025). Research among Indonesian Gen Z consumers further indicates a pathway from social media marketing to consumer engagement, purchase intention, and actual purchase behavior (Astuti et al., 2025).

The strategic implication is that brands should not treat purchase as the immediate objective of every social media post. A more effective consumer journey begins with awareness and relevance, develops through interaction and engagement, advances through credible information and social proof, and culminates in a low-friction purchase experience. At the awareness stage, brands should maximize discoverability and relevance. At the engagement stage, they should encourage conversation and participation. At the consideration stage, they should provide reviews, demonstrations, comparisons, and trustworthy product information. At the purchase stage, clear calls to action, convenient social-commerce features, and confidence-building information should reduce friction.

Based on the synthesis, an integrated framework can be formulated in which social media marketing inputs—entertainment, interactivity, trend relevance, informativeness, authenticity, influencer credibility, and UGC—stimulate cognitive, emotional, and

behavioral engagement. Engagement then contributes to trust, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand preference, which subsequently strengthen purchase intention and, under favorable conditions, actual purchase behavior. This framework also explains why isolated tactics may produce weak results: influencer marketing without credibility may generate attention without trust; entertainment without product information may generate engagement without conversion; UGC without quality can create volume without persuasion; and personalization without transparency may damage consumer trust.

Future research should test this framework using longitudinal and cross-platform designs because engagement and purchase behavior develop over time and platform characteristics differ. Comparisons across TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and social commerce environments may reveal differences in content formats, algorithms, interaction patterns, and conversion mechanisms. Future studies should also examine cultural and product-category differences and ethical issues involving personalization, influencer disclosure, privacy, misinformation, and persuasive social-commerce environments.

CONCLUSION

Social media marketing can enhance brand engagement and purchase decisions among Generation Z when it is designed as an interactive relationship-building system rather than as a sequence of promotional messages. The literature reviewed in this article identifies seven strategic priorities: entertaining and interactive content; authentic and informative storytelling; credible influencer partnerships; user-generated content and e-WOM; engagement before direct selling; integration of trust, awareness, and purchase pathways; and transparent personalization.

The central conclusion is that engagement is a strategic bridge between social media activity and consumer decision-making. Generation Z consumers do not simply receive brand messages; they evaluate, discuss, remix, endorse, challenge, and share them within social networks. Brands that create credible content, facilitate meaningful participation, and provide strong social proof are better positioned to convert attention into trust, preference, and purchase. The proposed framework offers a practical basis for developing and evaluating Generation Z social media strategies while also providing a foundation for future empirical research.

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