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Building Loyalty Amid Changing Trends: A Thematic Analysis of Digital Brand Engagement Strategies for Generation Z

Original Article

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how digital brand engagement strategies build loyalty among Generation Z amid rapidly changing digital trends. Using a document-based thematic analysis of literature published between 2020 and 2025, the study synthesizes findings on Gen Z media habits, brand interaction patterns, and the relational mechanisms linking engagement to loyalty. Six core themes emerge: authenticity and transparency, useful and entertaining content, community participation and co-creation, influencer and user-generated content credibility, personalization and immersive experience, and value alignment. The findings indicate that Gen Z does not become loyal through repeated exposure or short-term attention alone. Rather, loyalty emerges when engagement is converted through trust, satisfaction, commitment, self-brand connection, community identification, emotional attachment, and psychological ownership. The study proposes that Gen Z loyalty is best understood as participatory loyalty—expressed not only through repeat purchase but also through sharing, saving, commenting, advocating, and sustained affiliation with brand communities. The study contributes a synthesized framework explaining how brands move from attention-seeking tactics to loyalty-building digital relationships in creator-centric, platform-native ecosystems.

Keywords: Digital Brand Engagement, Generation Z, Participatory Loyalty, Social Media Marketing, Thematic Analysis.

1. Introduction

Generation Z is deeply embedded in digital and mobile media ecosystems and responds strongly to interactive, dynamic, inclusive, and socially meaningful brand communication (Debnath, 2025; Naveen Kumar et al., 2026; Li, 2026). Across short-form video and social media environments, Gen Z uses platforms not only for entertainment but also for self-presentation, information seeking, community participation, and creator-following (Akhmad et al., 2024; Thi Nguyet Trang et al., 2025; Flecha-Ortiz et al., 2023). Digital brand engagement is therefore more than a promotional activity; it has become part of everyday identity work, social interaction, and platform-native media consumption (Priporas et al., 2017; Yağmur, 2024).

Short-form video platforms and creator-led ecosystems have intensified competition for attention while also changing how trust is formed. Entertaining, informative, and socially

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shared content influences Gen Z attitudes, purchase intentions, and interactions, particularly when perceived as useful, credible, and emotionally resonant (Hoa, 2025; Wu & Su, 2025; Lacap et al., 2025). Simultaneously, authenticity-centered environments such as BeReal and TikTok have normalized expectations for candid, spontaneous, and less curated communication (Frenette et al., 2024; Taylor, 2023).

Although brands can attract attention through trend-based content and platform visibility, attention does not automatically become loyalty (Satrio & Prihandoko, 2025; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). The literature increasingly shows that engagement must pass through relational mechanisms—trust, commitment, satisfaction, community identification, and psychological ownership—before it produces advocacy, repurchase intention, or brand loyalty (Saikia & Bhattacharjee, 2024; Yang & Chang, 2023; Changani & Kumar, 2024). This problem is especially salient for Gen Z because the cohort's media behavior is fast-moving, creator-centric, and sensitive to authenticity, social values, and perceived manipulation (Chamoli et al., 2025; Subrahmanyam, 2025; Díaz-Martín et al., 2020).

Accordingly, this study asks: How do digital brand engagement strategies build loyalty among Generation Z in the context of changing trends and platform-native digital culture? The objective is not to test a single-variable model but to synthesize recent evidence into a coherent thematic explanation of how engagement becomes loyalty in Gen Z markets (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Vrontis et al., 2021).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Generation Z Digital Habits and Platform Preferences

Gen Z's digital habits are shaped by entertainment, information, self-expression, and social connection (Akhmad et al., 2024; Thi Nguyet Trang et al., 2025; Flecha-Ortiz et al., 2023). TikTok use, for example, combines passive consumption with entertainment-plus-information functions, while Instagram may involve curated self-presentation alongside more private or authentic secondary account practices (Yağmur, 2024; Martínez-Fresneda Osorio, 2025). Across platforms, Gen Z tends to favor visually engaging, trustworthy, and interactive brand content and expects fast, information-rich, frictionless experiences (Priporas et al., 2017; del Olmo-Arriaga et al., 2025).

2.2. Authenticity, Relatability, and Transparent Communication

A recurring theme across recent studies is that Gen Z prefers authentic and relatable communication over polished, overtly promotional messaging (Frenette et al., 2024; Song et al., 2024; Zhao & Chung, 2025). Candid posts are perceived as emotionally closer to everyday life, reducing psychological distance and increasing trustworthiness (Khalfallah & Keller, 2025; Xia et al., 2025). Transparency, consistency, and a human voice further strengthen trust, while sterile or transaction-heavy communication can weaken authenticity perceptions (Chamoli et al., 2025; Ngo et al., 2025; Ali et al., 2025).

2.3. Personalization, Immersion, and Interactive Experiences

Personalization, AI recommendations, and immersive AR/VR experiences can strengthen Gen Z engagement when they improve relevance, enjoyment, and decision-making (Chitra et al., 2025; Mahajan et al., 2025; Wajdi et al., 2025). Yet these effects are conditional: they work best when transparent, low-friction, useful, and not overly invasive (Valerio Rossi et al., 2025; Kabir & Kang, 2024). Excessive automation, privacy concerns, and technological anxiety can reduce acceptance and trust (Valerio Rossi et al., 2025; Zhu et al., 2025).

2.4. Community-Building, Self-Brand Connection, and Relationship Marketing

Brand communities play a critical role in converting engagement into loyalty. Shared identity, belonging, self-expression, and common aspirations strengthen community identification and brand loyalty (Jai et al., 2022; Santos et al., 2022; Chavadi et al., 2023). Participation matters, but not only visible participation: even lurking can positively relate to loyalty when commitment is strong (Fernandes & Castro, 2020; Ansari & Riasi, 2020). Relationship marketing research further shows that trust, satisfaction, commitment, and psychological ownership are core mechanisms through which digital engagement translates into repeat purchase and advocacy (Saikia & Bhattacharjee, 2024; Yang & Chang, 2023; Hollebeek et al., 2014).

2.5. Influencers, User-Generated Content, and Loyalty Outcomes

Influencer and creator content is especially important for Gen Z because trustworthiness, attractiveness, relatability, and parasocial bonds shape engagement more consistently than expertise alone (Koay & Satyadi, 2025; Azouri, 2025; Marklen et al., 2025). Genuine influencer content produces stronger attitudes and intentions than superficial content (Song et al., 2024). User-generated content is often perceived as more credible than overt branded content and can support brand equity, trust, attachment, and purchase intention (Leite & Baptista, 2022; Prabadianti et al., 2025; Naeem et al., 2025).

2.6. Previous Research

Prior syntheses have examined social media marketing and brand loyalty (Jai et al., 2022), influencer marketing frameworks (Vrontis et al., 2021), and Gen Z impulse purchase behavior (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). However, few studies integrate authenticity, community, creator credibility, personalization, and value alignment into a single thematic account of how engagement converts into loyalty for Gen Z. This study addresses that gap through document-based thematic analysis (Priporas et al., 2017; Vrontis et al., 2021).

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative document-based thematic analysis. The corpus consists of recent evidence from 2020–2025 concerning Generation Z, digital brand engagement, and loyalty-related outcomes across social media, short-form video, influencer marketing, community participation, personalization, and value alignment (Priporas et al., 2017; Vrontis et al., 2021; Debnath, 2025; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019).

3.1. Document Selection

Documents were included when they addressed at least one of the following: (1) Gen Z digital media habits and brand interaction, (2) authenticity and trust in digital communication, (3) co-creation or community participation, (4) personalization or immersive digital experience, (5) influencer or UGC credibility, or (6) loyalty outcomes such as trust, advocacy, repeat purchase intention, commitment, or emotional attachment (Batamirova & Thrassou, 2025; Kolbl & Šušulić, 2025; Flecha-Ortiz et al., 2023). Documents were excluded if they lacked peer review, focused on non-digital contexts, or did not address Gen Z or loyalty outcomes.

3.2. Thematic Analysis Procedure

The analysis used iterative coding of recurrent concepts across the corpus. Initial codes included authenticity, transparency, usefulness, entertainment, e-WOM, trust, parasociality,

community identification, self-brand connection, psychological ownership, personalization, immersion, value alignment, and loyalty outcomes (Nyadzayo et al., 2020; Cardoso et al., 2026; Lou & Yuan, 2019). These codes were then grouped into broader themes explaining how digital engagement strategies convert into Gen Z loyalty. Coding was performed independently by two coders, with discrepancies resolved through discussion to enhance trustworthiness.

4. Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Authenticity Builds Trust

Across the corpus, authenticity emerges as the central currency of Gen Z engagement (Frenette et al., 2024; Chamoli et al., 2025; Song et al., 2024). Gen Z prefers brand communication that appears candid, spontaneous, sincere, and emotionally close to everyday life (Taylor, 2023; Khalfallah & Keller, 2025). Overly polished, advertising-heavy content is more likely to be seen as performative or distant (Song et al., 2024; Zhao & Chung, 2025). Trust grows when messages use a human voice, show transparency, and avoid excessive promotional polish (Ngo et al., 2025; Guerra-Tamez et al., 2024).

Theme 2: Useful and Entertaining Content Drives Engagement

Short-form content performs best when it combines enjoyment with decision-support value (Hoa, 2025; Dong et al., 2024). Content quality, credibility, storytelling, information relevance, and emotionality strengthen brand trust, perceived value, and purchase intention (Wu & Su, 2025; Lacap et al., 2025). Electronic word-of-mouth and information adoption repeatedly intensify these effects, suggesting that content must not only attract attention but also be adopted as socially meaningful or useful (Bui et al., 2025; Pillay, 2021; Bhutto et al., 2024).

Theme 3: Community and Identification Convert Engagement into Loyalty

Community-based participation is a major path from engagement to loyalty (Changani & Kumar, 2024; Jai et al., 2022). Shared identity, belonging, and consumer–brand fit deepen attachment and commitment (Chavadi et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2021). Both active contribution and passive lurking can support loyalty when members identify strongly with the brand community (Fernandes & Castro, 2020; Ansari & Riasi, 2020). Co-creation also reinforces psychological ownership and affective commitment over time (Wang & Yang, 2025; Haverila et al., 2022).

Theme 4: Influencer and UGC Credibility Strengthens Attachment

Creator-led communication works most consistently through trustworthiness, attractiveness, authenticity, and parasocial bonds (Koay & Satyadi, 2025; Azouri, 2025; Leite & Baptista, 2022). Expertise matters less consistently than trustworthiness for Gen Z outcomes (Vo et al., 2025; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). Self-disclosure and relatability enhance emotional resonance, which can transfer to the endorsed brand (Soni & Bhukya, 2025; Abd Aziz et al., 2023). UGC is frequently viewed as more credible than overt branded content and can stimulate stronger community feeling, attachment, and advocacy (Prabadianti et al., 2025; Naeem et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2025).

Theme 5: Personalization and Immersive Experience Are Conditional Enablers

AI personalization, AR, and VR can elevate relevance, telepresence, immersion, and satisfaction (Chitra et al., 2025; Mahajan et al., 2025; Wajdi et al., 2025). Yet the evidence also

shows tension: personalization supports loyalty-related outcomes only when it feels helpful, transparent, and easy to use (Kabir & Kang, 2024). When it appears invasive, over-automated, or privacy-threatening, its positive effect weakens (Valerio Rossi et al., 2025; Guerra-Tamez et al., 2024).

Theme 6: Value Alignment Encourages Repeat Participation

Sustainability, ethical consistency, transparency, and inclusivity are increasingly tied to Gen Z loyalty (Pushpa et al., 2024; Subrahmanyam, 2025; Batamirova & Thrassou, 2025). Value alignment supports emotional resonance, peer validation, advocacy, and purchase-related intentions (Theocharis & Tsekouropoulos, 2025; Lin et al., 2023). This suggests that trend-responsive engagement is more effective when it reflects visible moral consistency rather than superficial cause-branding (Mishra et al., 2026; Ngo et al., 2025).

Table 1. Thematic summary of digital brand engagement strategies and loyalty outcomes for Generation Z

Theme	Engagement Strategy	Relational Mechanism	Loyalty Outcome	Representative Sources
Authenticity	Candid, transparent communication	Trust	Favorable attitudes, loyalty pathways	Frenette et al. (2024); Taylor (2023)
Content value	Useful, entertaining short-form video	Satisfaction, e-WOM adoption	Engagement, purchase intention	Hoa (2025); Dong et al. (2024)
Community	Participation, co-creation	Identification, affective commitment	Advocacy, repeat participation	Changani & Kumar (2024); Wang & Yang (2025)
Creator credibility	Influencer/UGC endorsement	Parasocial trust, attachment	Purchase intention, advocacy	Koay & Satyadi (2025); Leite & Baptista (2022)
Personalization	AI/AR/VR experiences	Perceived usefulness, trust	Continuance intention	Chitra et al. (2025); Kabir & Kang (2024)
Value alignment	Ethical, sustainable branding	Emotional resonance	Advocacy, repurchase intention	Pushpa et al. (2024); Lin et al. (2023)

Note. Compiled by the authors from the reviewed corpus (2020–2025)

4.1. Discussion

The strongest pattern across studies is that engagement becomes loyalty only when mediated by relational processes (Saikia & Bhattacharjee, 2024; Yang & Chang, 2023; Satrio & Prihandoko, 2025). Trust is the most recurring mediator, but not the only one. Satisfaction, commitment, self-brand connection, community identification, emotional attachment, and psychological ownership also convert interaction into repeat purchase, advocacy, and stronger brand loyalty (Nyadzayo et al., 2020; Thi Phuong et al., 2025; Changani & Kumar, 2024; Yu et al., 2023). Taken together, these findings support a trust-to-loyalty conversion model in which engagement inputs generate loyalty only after they produce relational depth.

For practitioners, the evidence implies that Gen Z brand strategy should combine four elements: authentic communication, credible creators, participatory community structures, and transparent personalization (Kabir & Kang, 2024; Priporas et al., 2017; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Brands should move away from one-way polished promotion toward platform-native engagement that invites reaction, contribution, and identification (Taylor, 2023; Jai et al., 2022; Nikolinakou et al., 2021). Creator collaborations are most

effective when the creator feels trustworthy and peer-like rather than merely famous (Azouri, 2025; Naeem et al., 2025).

Novelty, virality, and impulse response do not guarantee loyalty (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Some digital stimuli can provoke positive emotion and immediate action, yet the evidence for sustained loyalty remains weaker unless deeper trust and commitment are formed (Vrontis et al., 2021; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). This is particularly relevant in fast trend cycles, where short-lived visibility may produce traffic or purchases but not durable attachment (Leckie et al., 2016; Ndhlovu & Maree, 2024).

Platform norms also matter. TikTok, Instagram, and authenticity-centered spaces such as BeReal operate with different expectations about polish, spontaneity, and creator intimacy (Taylor, 2023; Flecha-Ortiz et al., 2023). Industry context matters as well, because many available studies are concentrated in fashion, beauty, luxury, hospitality, and retail-adjacent sectors (Batamirova & Thrassou, 2025; Kolbl & Šušulić, 2025; Liu et al., 2021). Loyalty strategies should therefore be adapted to platform-specific cultures rather than copied across channels without translation.

5. Conclusion

This thematic analysis concludes that Gen Z loyalty in digital environments is not primarily built through polished promotional content, but through authentic, community-based, creator-mediated, personalized, and value-aligned engagement. Exposure and short-term attention are insufficient; loyalty emerges only when digital engagement is converted through relational mechanisms such as trust, attachment, satisfaction, commitment, self-brand connection, and psychological ownership. Accordingly, brands seeking Gen Z loyalty should prioritize transparent communication, credible creators, participatory communities, useful and entertaining content, and visible alignment with ethical and sustainability values.

A key conceptual implication is that Gen Z loyalty should be understood not merely as repeat purchase but as ongoing participatory affiliation—expressed through sharing, saving, remixing, lurking, advocating, and defending the brand in digital spaces. This suggests that loyalty measurement for Gen Z may need to move beyond transactional indicators toward relational and participatory signals. Future research is encouraged to compare authenticity norms across platforms, examine whether short-form engagement converts into durable loyalty over time, and explore how AI-driven personalization can remain human, transparent, and non-intrusive for Gen Z audiences.

5.1. Declaration of Generative AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly Application and QuillBot to improve the clarity, readability, and language accuracy of the text. Output generated by the tools was carefully reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of this article. The authors made all substantive intellectual contributions, including conceptualization, data analysis, interpretation, and final decisions on content, arguments, and conclusions. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity, originality, and academic quality of this article.

5.2. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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