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Scrolling, Trusting, Belonging: A Qualitative Thematic Document Analysis of Digital Consumer Behavior among Generation Z and Its Implications for Marketing Management

Original Article

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Abstract

Generation Z (Gen Z) is increasingly central to marketing management, yet its digital consumer behavior is often described through generalizations rather than systematic interpretation. This study used a qualitative design based on thematic document analysis. It examined how recent scholarly and professional documents published between 2021 and 2023 explain Gen Z's digital consumer behavior and what these explanations imply for marketing management decisions. The corpus consisted of 17 purposively selected documents covering digital and social media marketing, influencer marketing, immersive technologies, and thematic analysis methodology. Following the reflexive thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke, the analysis generated four themes. The first is platform-mediated discovery, in which attention is shaped by algorithmic feeds. The second is relational trust, in which credibility is built through perceived authenticity, congruence, and homophily rather than brand authority. The third is consumption as identity and belonging, in which purchases serve symbolic and social functions. The fourth is conditional engagement, in which Gen Z's openness is balanced by skepticism toward undisclosed persuasion and attention to ethical value. The themes are integrated into a conceptual sequence that links digital stimuli, trust evaluation, identity validation, and conditional action. The findings suggest that marketing managers should treat Gen Z segmentation, positioning, and communication as community-based and transparency-driven. The study is limited by its document-based design and its reliance on a small corpus. It proposes directions for empirical research using interviews, netnography, and platform data.

Keywords: Generation Z, Digital Consumer Behavior, Marketing Management, Influencer Marketing, Thematic Analysis.

1. Introduction

Marketing management is the discipline of analyzing markets, selecting target segments, designing value propositions, and coordinating marketing programs to create and capture customer value. The digital environment has changed nearly every stage of this process. Consumers no longer move through a linear funnel that brands control. They move through feeds, recommendations, reviews, short videos, creator content, and peer conversations that overlap and often unfold inside a single application. Dwivedi et al. (2021) argued that digital and social media marketing has reached a point where technology, data, and participatory culture jointly reshape how brands and consumers interact, and that existing theory must be extended to keep pace.

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Generation Z, broadly understood as the cohort born from the late 1990s to the early 2010s, is the first generation to grow up with smartphones, social platforms, and algorithmic personalization as ordinary features of daily life. Their consumer behavior therefore cannot be treated as a faster version of earlier cohorts' behavior. It reflects a different relationship with information, with peers, and with commercial persuasion. For marketing managers, the practical consequence is that familiar tools such as mass advertising, brand-centered messaging, and one-way promotion may lose effectiveness unless they are rethought for environments where trust is earned through participation.

Several research streams address parts of this problem. Studies of influencer marketing have shown how credibility, congruence, and perceived similarity shape followers' responses (Belanche et al., 2021; Bu et al., 2022; Vrontis et al., 2021). Work on the commercialization of social media stars has described how brands use creators strategically while navigating disclosure and authenticity concerns (Hudders et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2021). Research on the digital acceleration that followed the COVID-19 pandemic has documented a lasting shift of marketing investment toward social media (Mason et al., 2021). Broader frameworks describe the rise of new technologies in marketing (Hoffman et al., 2022) and the prospects of immersive environments (Dwivedi et al., 2023). Kotler et al. (2021) proposed a human-centric view of technology in marketing practice, which they termed Marketing 5.0.

However, these streams are rarely synthesized around a single generational cohort with a marketing management lens. Quantitative studies typically test isolated relationships, such as the effect of influencer credibility on purchase intention, and offer limited insight into how different mechanisms fit together in the lived consumption of Gen Z. A qualitative synthesis can fill part of this gap by interpreting what documents collectively say about patterns of meaning, not only patterns of statistical association.

This study therefore asks two research questions. First, what themes characterize digital consumer behavior among Gen Z in recent scholarly and professional documents? Second, what implications do these themes carry for marketing management decisions? The study contributes a thematic account of Gen Z's digital consumer behavior, a conceptual sequence that links the themes, and a set of managerial implications organized around segmentation, positioning, and marketing program design.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Marketing management in a digital and platform-mediated environment

Classical marketing management is organized around analysis, strategy, and implementation. Managers analyze customers and competitors, select segments and positioning, and then configure the marketing mix. Digitalization has not removed these tasks, but it has altered the information available and the speed at which decisions can be tested. Dwivedi et al. (2021) emphasized that social media, data analytics, and automation change both the capabilities of firms and the expectations of consumers. They also noted that platform dynamics, such as algorithmic distribution and user-generated content, place part of the marketing process outside the firm's direct control.

Hoffman et al. (2022) framed the rise of new technologies in marketing as a shift that affects consumers, firms, and the broader ecosystem simultaneously. Their framework suggests that technologies should be evaluated not only for efficiency but also for how they change

relationships and responsibilities. This point is relevant for Gen Z, because their daily experience is already structured by technologies that personalize content and mediate social interaction.

Kotler et al. (2021) argued that marketers should use technology to serve human needs rather than replace human judgment. They described a progression from product-centric to customer-centric to human-centric marketing and suggested that the next stage integrates technology with empathy, values, and inclusion. This perspective provides a normative anchor for interpreting Gen Z behavior, since many of the documents in the corpus emphasize authenticity and transparency.

2.2. Digital consumer behavior and Generation Z

Digital consumer behavior refers to how people search for information, evaluate alternatives, make purchase decisions, and share post-purchase experiences in digitally mediated environments. For Gen Z, social platforms often act as search engines, shopping windows, and community spaces at once. Mason et al. (2021) documented how social media marketing gained strategic importance after the pandemic, as brands moved resources into channels where consumers were already spending time. The implication for younger cohorts is that discovery and persuasion increasingly occur before a consumer visits any brand-owned channel (Dipoatmodjo et al., 2026; Windarsari & Arif, 2026).

Gen Z is also characterized in the literature by sensitivity to values. Djafarova and Foots (2022), for example, examined ethical consumption among Gen Z consumers through the theory of planned behavior and showed that attitudes and social norms matter in how young consumers approach ethical purchasing. This suggests that digital behavior cannot be separated from moral and social considerations.

2.3. Influencers, trust, and persuasion

Influencer marketing has become a central tool for reaching younger consumers. Vrontis et al. (2021) provided a systematic review and integrative framework, showing that research has examined influencer characteristics, content features, audience responses, and brand outcomes, but that integration across these areas remains incomplete. Hudders et al. (2021) proposed a conceptual framework describing how brands use social media influencers strategically and highlighted the importance of source characteristics, content, and audience processing.

Belanche et al. (2021) showed that congruence between the influencer, the product, and the consumer shapes follower responses. Bu et al. (2022) examined homophily, or perceived similarity, and related it to value co-creation behavior and purchase intention. Lee et al. (2022) explored why consumers follow influencers on Instagram, and found that motives and materialism shape engagement. Zhou et al. (2021) analyzed narrative strategies and the challenges of commercialized content and sponsorship disclosure. Together, these studies suggest that trust in digital environments is relational and conditional.

2.4. Immersive and emerging technologies

Beyond social media, emerging technologies are reshaping consumer experience. Dwivedi et al. (2023) examined metaverse marketing and discussed opportunities and risks for brands, including questions of identity, privacy, and consumer well-being. Although immersive

commerce is not yet mainstream, early adoption among younger cohorts makes it relevant for forward-looking marketing management.

2.5. Research gap

The literature offers rich but fragmented accounts of influencers, platforms, technologies, and ethical concerns. What is less visible is an integrated qualitative reading of how these elements combine in Gen Z digital consumer behavior and what that implies for marketing management decisions. This study addresses that gap through thematic document analysis.

3. Methods

It is essential to include comprehensive details to enable the replication of the work. When a reagent is utilized in the study, it is important to specify the supplier's information when applicable. Any methods that have been previously published should be cited appropriately, with only pertinent modifications being outlined. In the context of epidemiological studies, it is crucial to provide information regarding the setting, timing, and location of the research. (Please use Heading style -> Text | Malaqbipublisher.com)

3.1. Research design

This study used a qualitative design based on thematic analysis of documents. Document analysis is appropriate when the evidence of interest is embedded in existing texts and when the aim is to interpret meaning and patterns across them rather than to measure variables. Thematic analysis was selected because it offers a flexible and transparent way to identify, organize, and interpret patterns of meaning. The study followed the reflexive thematic analysis approach described by Braun and Clarke (2021, 2022), which treats themes as interpretive constructions generated through the analyst's active engagement with the data rather than as categories that simply emerge. Naeem et al. (2023) provided a step-by-step guide to moving from codes to a conceptual model, which informed the final integration step.

3.2. Document corpus and selection

The data corpus consisted of documents published between 2021 and 2023 that addressed digital and social media marketing, influencer marketing, emerging technologies in marketing, young or Gen Z consumers, and qualitative methodology. Documents were purposively selected using three criteria. First, they had to be peer-reviewed journal articles or authoritative professional books. Second, they had to speak to consumer responses, marketing strategy, or technology in digital environments. Third, they had to offer conceptual frameworks, systematic reviews, or empirical findings that could be interpreted qualitatively. The final corpus comprised 17 documents, listed in the reference list. Not every document focuses exclusively on Gen Z. Documents on digital and social media marketing in general were included because Gen Z is a heavy user of these environments, and their claims were interpreted with attention to relevance for this cohort. This is a limitation discussed in Section 6.

3.3. Analytical procedure

Analysis followed six recursive phases. In the first phase, familiarization, the documents were read repeatedly with attention to how consumer behavior, trust, persuasion, and technology were described. In the second phase, initial codes were generated for segments of

text that expressed a distinct idea, such as "algorithmic discovery," "perceived similarity," "disclosure," or "identity expression." In the third phase, codes were clustered into candidate themes based on conceptual proximity. In the fourth phase, candidate themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and against the whole corpus to check that each theme was coherent and distinct. In the fifth phase, themes were defined and named. In the sixth phase, the themes were integrated into a conceptual sequence and linked to marketing management decisions.

3.4. Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Several practices supported the quality of the analysis. Coding decisions were documented and revisited during theme review. Disconfirming evidence, for example documents that emphasized limits to influencer effectiveness, was actively sought and incorporated. The conceptual model was derived from code relationships rather than imposed in advance. Following Braun and Clarke (2021), the analysis is presented as reflexive and interpretive rather than as an attempt at objective coding reliability. The analyst's position is that of a marketing management scholar interested in how digital behavior translates into managerial choices, and this perspective inevitably shaped the interpretation.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis generated four themes. Each is presented below with its definition, supporting evidence from the corpus, and relevance to Gen Z.

4.1. Theme 1: Platform-mediated discovery

The first theme describes how consumer attention and awareness are increasingly shaped by platform logic. Documents in the corpus portray social media not merely as a communication channel but as an environment in which products, opinions, and brands are encountered incidentally. Dwivedi et al. (2021) described how algorithmic curation and user-generated content shift control over visibility away from firms. Mason et al. (2021) showed that the pandemic accelerated the move of marketing effort into social media, which implies that discovery for younger consumers now happens largely inside these platforms.

For Gen Z, this means that the first meaningful encounter with a brand often occurs in a feed rather than through a search or a store visit. The consumer does not necessarily begin with a need and look for solutions. A need or desire may be triggered by content that appears in a personalized stream. Hoffman et al. (2022) suggested that new technologies change the relationship between consumers and firms by making interactions more continuous and data-driven (Arif & Windarsari, 2026; Riu et al., 2026). In this theme, the key insight is that discovery is passive, personalized, and platform-dependent, so the brand's visibility depends on both content quality and platform dynamics.

4.2. Theme 2: Relational trust

The second theme concerns how credibility is established. The documents consistently suggest that trust in digital environments is built through relationships rather than institutional authority. Vrontis et al. (2021) synthesized evidence that influencer attributes such as expertise, attractiveness, and trustworthiness shape audience responses. Belanche et al. (2021) emphasized congruence, meaning that responses improve when the influencer fits the product

and the follower. Bu et al. (2022) highlighted homophily, which suggests that perceived similarity between the follower and the influencer fosters value co-creation behavior and purchase intention.

This theme is particularly relevant for Gen Z because their social worlds are largely mediated by platforms where creators appear as peers rather than as distant celebrities. Hudders et al. (2021) noted that source characteristics and content strategy jointly influence persuasion, which implies that trust is partly a function of how content is framed and perceived. In managerial terms, the theme suggests that brands cannot simply purchase credibility. They must cultivate relationships and select partners whose values and audiences genuinely align with the brand.

4.3. Theme 3: Consumption as identity and belonging

The third theme captures the symbolic and social functions of digital consumption. Lee et al. (2022) examined motives for following influencers and showed that engagement is linked to personal and social needs, including materialism in some cases. Their findings imply that consumers may follow creators not only for information but also for inspiration, status, or a sense of connection. Djafarova and Foots (2022) similarly connected consumption choices to attitudes and social norms, which indicates that purchases can express values and group membership.

For Gen Z, the implication is that products and brands function as resources for identity construction and social signaling in digital communities. A purchase may be a way to participate in a trend, signal alignment with a community, or express a personal stance. Kotler et al. (2021) pointed toward the importance of values and community in contemporary marketing, which resonates with this theme. For marketing management, the theme suggests that positioning should address not only functional benefits but also the identity and belonging benefits that the brand enables.

4.4. Theme 4: Conditional engagement

The fourth theme concerns the balance between openness to digital persuasion and skepticism toward it. The documents indicate that consumers do not accept commercial messages uncritically. Zhou et al. (2021) analyzed the tension between narrative strategies, commercialized content, and sponsorship disclosure, and their work suggests that perceived manipulation can undermine the effectiveness of influencer collaboration. Hudders et al. (2021) similarly noted that persuasion knowledge and disclosure play roles in how audiences process sponsored content.

Ethical concerns add another dimension. Djafarova and Foots (2022) showed that ethical consumption among Gen Z is shaped by attitudes and norms, which implies that brands are evaluated on conduct as well as on product attributes. Dwivedi et al. (2023) raised questions about privacy, identity, and well-being in immersive environments, indicating that new technologies may intensify these concerns. In this theme, Gen Z engagement is conditional. It is granted when content feels authentic, disclosure is transparent, and brand behavior is consistent with stated values, and it can be withdrawn quickly when these conditions are not met.

4.5. Integrating the themes: a conceptual sequence

The four themes can be connected in a conceptual sequence. Digital stimuli are encountered through platform-mediated discovery. Attention is converted into consideration through relational trust, which acts as the primary credibility filter. Consideration is shaped by identity and belonging, which give the product symbolic meaning for the consumer. Finally, action is moderated by conditional engagement, in which authenticity, transparency, and ethical consistency determine whether interest becomes purchase, advocacy, or rejection. This sequence is not strictly linear, since consumers move back and forth among stages and may share content before purchasing. It nonetheless offers a useful heuristic for managers who need to align marketing programs with the logic of Gen Z digital behavior.

4.6. Discussion

Interpreting the findings

The four themes suggest that Gen Z digital consumer behavior is best understood as a socially embedded and platform-structured process rather than as an individual rational choice. This interpretation is consistent with the broader argument of Dwivedi et al. (2021) that digital marketing must be theorized with attention to technology, social dynamics, and consumer agency. It also supports the view of Hoffman et al. (2022) that technological change reshapes relationships and not only tools.

The prominence of relational trust aligns with the influencer literature, in which congruence, homophily, and source characteristics repeatedly appear as drivers of response (Belanche et al., 2021; Bu et al., 2022; Vrontis et al., 2021). The identity theme extends this literature by suggesting that trust is not only about reducing risk but also about enabling belonging, a point that resonates with the motives documented by Lee et al. (2022). The conditional engagement theme offers a counterweight to optimistic accounts of influencer marketing. It indicates that effectiveness depends on perceived authenticity and transparency, in line with the concerns raised by Zhou et al. (2021).

Implications for marketing management

Segmentation and targeting. The themes suggest that segmentation of Gen Z should go beyond demographics. Managers may benefit from segmenting by platform behavior, community membership, and value orientation. Because discovery is platform-mediated, understanding which platforms and content formats a segment uses is a practical necessity. Because identity and belonging matter, segments defined by shared interests or values may be more actionable than segments defined by age alone.

Positioning and value proposition. Positioning for Gen Z should articulate not only functional benefits but also the identity and community benefits that the brand supports. Kotler et al. (2021) argued that human-centric marketing integrates values and empathy with technology, and the present findings suggest that this orientation is particularly relevant for younger consumers. Brands that communicate a coherent set of values and demonstrate them through behavior are more likely to meet the conditions for engagement.

Marketing program design. For communication, managers should prioritize participatory and creator-driven formats over one-way advertising, while choosing partners on the basis of

congruence and audience similarity (Belanche et al., 2021; Bu et al., 2022). Disclosure practices should be transparent, because perceived concealment can damage credibility (Zhou et al., 2021). For product and service design, brands can create features that support sharing, personalization, and community participation. For distribution, integrating discovery, evaluation, and purchase within the same platform environment can reduce friction. For pricing, value perceptions may be influenced by social proof and perceived authenticity as well as by price levels.

Measurement and governance. Because trust and engagement are conditional, managers should monitor qualitative signals such as sentiment, comments, and community discussion in addition to conventional performance indicators. Governance of influencer partnerships, data use, and emerging technologies should address privacy and well-being concerns, as emphasized by Dwivedi et al. (2023).

Theoretical contributions

The study contributes an integrative qualitative account that links platform discovery, relational trust, identity, and conditional engagement. It also contributes a conceptual sequence that can be tested in future research. By positioning the themes within marketing management decisions, the study connects consumer behavior insights to strategic choices, which is a link that is often implicit in the literature.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the corpus was small and purposively selected, so the themes are interpretive and not exhaustive. Second, not all documents focused exclusively on Gen Z, and some themes were inferred from literature on digital consumers more broadly. Third, document analysis does not capture the lived experience of Gen Z consumers directly, so findings should be treated as propositions rather than confirmed relationships. Fourth, the analysis reflects the interpretive position of a single analyst. Fifth, the corpus is concentrated in the period 2021 to 2023, and platform practices evolve quickly, so some findings may require updating. Future research should combine interviews, focus groups, and netnography with Gen Z participants, and should consider cultural and national differences, including the Indonesian context.

5. Conclusion

This study examined digital consumer behavior among Generation Z through a qualitative thematic analysis of documents and drew implications for marketing management. Four themes were identified: platform-mediated discovery, relational trust, consumption as identity and belonging, and conditional engagement. Together they portray a consumer whose attention is shaped by algorithmic environments, whose trust is earned through relationships and perceived similarity, whose purchases carry symbolic and social meaning, and whose engagement depends on authenticity, transparency, and ethical consistency.

For marketing managers, the central message is that Gen Z cannot be reached effectively through broadcast logic alone. Segmentation should reflect platform behavior and community membership. Positioning should combine functional, identity, and values-based benefits.

Marketing programs should be participatory, transparent, and aligned with the creators and communities that Gen Z trusts. The conceptual sequence proposed here offers a starting point for empirical testing. Future studies should use interviews, netnography, and mixed methods to validate and refine the themes, and should examine how they vary across cultures and platforms. The key findings and suggestions of the research should be summarized, drawing solely from the study's results. It is important to refrain from referencing prior studies.

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. All substantive intellectual contributions, including conceptualization, analysis, interpretation of data, and final decisions regarding content, arguments, and conclusions, were carried out solely by the authors. 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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