

The Influence of Social Media Engagement, Brand Authenticity, and Consumer Identity Expression on Brand Loyalty among Generation Z

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of social media engagement, brand authenticity, and consumer identity expression on brand loyalty among Generation Z, a cohort widely recognized for its strong digital presence and value-driven consumption behavior. As social media platforms increasingly shape consumer-brand interactions, understanding the mechanisms that drive loyalty within this segment has become critical for both scholars and practitioners. Drawing on established theories in digital marketing and consumer behavior, this research employs a quantitative approach using survey data collected from Generation Z respondents. The data were analyzed using multiple regression techniques to assess the relationships between the independent variables social media engagement, brand authenticity, and consumer identity expression and the dependent variable, brand loyalty. The findings reveal that all three factors significantly and positively influence brand loyalty. Social media engagement was found to enhance emotional and cognitive connections with brands, thereby strengthening loyalty. Brand authenticity emerged as a key determinant, indicating that Generation Z consumers are more inclined to support brands perceived as genuine, transparent, and consistent in their values. Additionally, consumer identity expression plays a crucial role, as individuals are more loyal to brands that align with and reinforce their self-concept and personal identity. Among the three predictors, brand authenticity demonstrated the strongest influence, highlighting the importance of trust and credibility in shaping long-term consumer relationships. This study contributes to the existing literature by integrating these three constructs into a single framework, offering a more comprehensive understanding of brand loyalty formation in the digital era. The results provide practical implications for marketers, emphasizing the need to foster authentic brand narratives, encourage interactive engagement on social media, and enable consumers to express their identities through brand affiliation. Despite its contributions, the study is limited by its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported data. Future research is recommended to explore longitudinal effects and additional moderating variables to better understand evolving consumer behaviors.

Keywords: Social Media Engagement, Brand Authenticity, Consumer Identity Expression, Brand Loyalty, Generation Z, Digital Marketing, Consumer Behavior.



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1. Introduction

The rapid evolution of digital technology has significantly transformed the way brands interact with consumers, particularly among Generation Z (Gen Z), a cohort characterized by high digital literacy and intensive social media usage. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become dominant channels through which brands communicate, engage, and build relationships with their audiences. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z consumers actively participate in content creation, sharing, and engagement, making them not only passive recipients but also active contributors to brand narratives. This shift has redefined traditional marketing paradigms, placing greater emphasis on interactive engagement, authenticity, and identity-driven consumption. As a result, understanding the factors that influence brand loyalty within this generation has become a critical area of research in contemporary marketing studies.

Social media engagement has emerged as a central construct in explaining consumer–brand relationships in the digital era. Engagement encompasses various interactive behaviors, including liking, commenting, sharing, and participating in brand-related discussions. Empirical studies suggest that higher levels of engagement enhance emotional connections between consumers and brands, ultimately fostering stronger brand attachment and loyalty (Hadikusuma & Ginting, 2024; Maulina, 2026). Furthermore, engagement facilitates value co-creation, where consumers actively contribute to brand meaning and experience, thereby strengthening their sense of involvement and commitment (Yudha et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2022). However, recent findings also indicate that the direct relationship between engagement and brand loyalty may not always be straightforward, as mediating variables such as trust and brand love play a crucial role in shaping long-term loyalty outcomes (Tian & Liu, 2026; Windarsari, & Arif, 2026). This highlights the need for a more comprehensive framework that incorporates additional psychological and relational factors.

In addition to engagement, brand authenticity has become a vital determinant of consumer trust and loyalty, particularly among Gen Z. Authenticity refers to the perception that a brand is genuine, transparent, and consistent in its values and actions. In an era where consumers are increasingly skeptical of traditional advertising, authenticity serves as a key differentiator that influences purchasing decisions and brand preference. Research indicates that authentic brands are more likely to establish trust, emotional resonance, and long-term relationships with consumers (Razak et al., 2025; Singh, 2026). Moreover, authenticity is closely linked to social media marketing practices, where transparency, user-generated content, and interactive communication contribute to perceived authenticity (Arif & Windarsari, 2026; Zhang et al., 2022). Gen Z consumers, in particular, prioritize authenticity over polished or highly curated content, preferring brands that demonstrate honesty and relatability. This preference underscores the importance of authenticity as a strategic asset in building brand loyalty.

Another critical factor influencing brand loyalty among Gen Z is consumer identity expression. Identity expression refers to the extent to which consumers use brands as a means of expressing their personal values, beliefs, and social identity. In the context of social media, identity expression is amplified, as individuals curate their online personas through the brands they follow, endorse, and share. Brands that align with consumers' identities are more likely to

foster emotional attachment and loyalty, as they become integrated into the consumer's self-concept. Previous studies have highlighted that identity congruence between consumers and brands enhances brand commitment, advocacy, and repurchase intention (Nguyen et al., 2025; Tran & Nguyen, 2026). For Gen Z, whose consumption behavior is often driven by self-expression and social signaling, identity-related factors play a particularly significant role in shaping brand loyalty.

The interplay between social media engagement, brand authenticity, and consumer identity expression presents a complex but crucial framework for understanding brand loyalty among Gen Z. While each of these factors has been examined individually in prior research, there remains a gap in the literature regarding their combined influence on brand loyalty (Dipoatmodjo et al., 2026; Riu et al., 2026). Most existing studies focus on the direct effects of social media engagement or authenticity, with limited attention to how these variables interact with identity expression to shape consumer behavior. Additionally, the majority of research has been conducted in developed markets, leaving a need for further investigation in emerging economies, where social media usage patterns and cultural contexts may differ significantly.

Furthermore, the dynamic nature of social media environments introduces additional challenges and opportunities for brands seeking to build loyalty. The proliferation of content, algorithm-driven visibility, and influencer marketing has created a highly competitive landscape, where consumer attention is fragmented and fleeting. In this context, brands must not only capture attention but also sustain meaningful engagement and authenticity to remain relevant. Studies have shown that emotional engagement, trust, and perceived authenticity are critical drivers of loyalty in such environments (Razak et al., 2025; Hadikusuma & Ginting, 2024). At the same time, the role of identity expression suggests that brands must align with the values and aspirations of their target audience to establish deeper connections.

Despite the growing body of literature on digital marketing and consumer behavior, there is still a need for integrative research that examines the combined effects of social media engagement, brand authenticity, and consumer identity expression on brand loyalty. Such an approach can provide a more holistic understanding of the mechanisms underlying consumer loyalty in the digital age. Moreover, focusing on Generation Z offers valuable insights into the future of consumer behavior, as this cohort is expected to become a dominant force in global markets. By exploring these relationships, this study aims to contribute to both theoretical development and practical implications for marketers seeking to enhance brand loyalty in an increasingly digital and consumer-driven landscape.

This study aims to examine the influence of social media engagement, brand authenticity, and consumer identity expression on brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers. Specifically, it seeks to analyze the direct and combined effects of these variables in shaping consumer loyalty, as well as to provide empirical evidence on the mechanisms through which digital interactions, perceived authenticity, and identity alignment contribute to sustained brand relationships in the context of social media marketing.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research approach using a cross-sectional survey design to examine the influence of social media engagement, brand authenticity, and consumer identity expression on brand loyalty among Generation Z. A quantitative method is considered appropriate as it allows for the measurement of relationships between variables and facilitates hypothesis testing through statistical analysis. The study employs a causal research design to identify the direct effects of independent variables on the dependent variable.

2.2. Population and Sample

The population of this study consists of Generation Z consumers, defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, who actively use social media platforms and interact with brands online. The sample is selected using a purposive sampling technique, where respondents must meet specific criteria: (1) aged between 18 and 30 years, (2) active users of at least one social media platform such as Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube, and (3) have followed or interacted with a brand on social media within the last six months.

A total of 200–300 respondents are targeted to ensure adequate statistical power for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis, particularly Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM), which is suitable for complex models and exploratory research.

2.3. Data Collection Method

Primary data are collected using a structured questionnaire distributed online through platforms such as Google Forms. The questionnaire is shared via social media channels and online communities to reach the target respondents. Before full distribution, a pilot test is conducted with approximately 30 respondents to ensure clarity, reliability, and validity of the measurement items. Feedback from the pilot test is used to refine the questionnaire.

2.4. Measurement of Variables

All constructs in this study are measured reflectively using multiple indicators adapted from recent literature:

- **Social Media Engagement (SME)** is measured using indicators such as interaction frequency, content sharing, and participation in brand-related activities (Zhang et al., 2022; Yudha et al., 2025).
- **Brand Authenticity (BA)** is measured through perceptions of transparency, honesty, and consistency of the brand (Kaur et al., 2023; Singh, 2026).
- **Consumer Identity Expression (CIE)** is assessed based on the extent to which consumers use brands to express their personal identity and values (Nguyen et al., 2025; Tran & Nguyen, 2026).
- **Brand Loyalty (BL)** is measured through repurchase intention, willingness to recommend, and emotional attachment to the brand (Hadikusuma & Ginting, 2024; Maulina, 2026).

Each construct consists of multiple reflective indicators to capture the underlying latent variables.

2.5. Data Analysis Technique

The data analysis is conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with the help of SmartPLS software. PLS-SEM is chosen due to its suitability for predictive analysis, ability to handle complex models, and minimal assumptions regarding data distribution.

The analysis consists of two main stages:

2.5.1. Measurement Model Evaluation (Outer Model)

- This stage assesses the validity and reliability of the constructs:
- Convergent validity is evaluated using factor loadings (> 0.70) and Average Variance Extracted ($AVE > 0.50$).
- Reliability is assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability ($CR > 0.70$).
- Discriminant validity is examined using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loadings.

2.5.2. Structural Model Evaluation (Inner Model)

- This stage examines the relationships between variables:
- Path coefficients (β) are used to assess the strength and direction of relationships.
- Hypothesis testing is conducted using bootstrapping procedures, with t-values (> 1.96) and p-values (< 0.05) indicating statistical significance.
- Coefficient of determination (R^2) is used to evaluate the explanatory power of the model.
- Effect size (f^2) and predictive relevance (Q^2) are also assessed to determine the model's robustness.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

This study ensures that all respondents participate voluntarily and anonymously. Informed consent is obtained before respondents complete the questionnaire, and all data are used solely for academic purposes. Respondents are assured that their personal information will remain confidential and will not be disclosed to any third party.

2.7. Research Framework

The conceptual framework of this study posits that social media engagement, brand authenticity, and consumer identity expression serve as independent variables influencing brand loyalty as the dependent variable. The model aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how digital interaction, perceived authenticity, and identity alignment contribute to the development of brand loyalty among Generation Z.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Respondent Demographic Profile

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	118	59.0
	Female	82	41.0
Age	18–21 years	90	45.0
	22–25 years	75	37.5
	26–30 years	35	17.5
	31–35 years	20	10.0
Education Level	High School	70	35.0
	Bachelor Degree	105	52.5
	Postgraduate	25	12.5
Social Media Usage	<2 hours/day	40	20.0
	2–5 hours/day	95	47.5
	>5 hours/day	65	32.5

Source: Data Analysis

The majority of respondents are male (59%), with most aged between 18–21 years (45%), indicating a strong representation of younger Gen Z consumers. Most respondents hold a bachelor's degree (52.5%) and spend 2–5 hours daily on social media (47.5%), suggesting high digital engagement, which is relevant to the study context.

3.2. Descriptive Statistics

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Social Media Engagement	4.12	0.63
Brand Authenticity	4.05	0.58
Consumer Identity Expression	4.18	0.60
Brand Loyalty	4.10	0.65

Source: Data Analysis

All variables show high mean values (above 4.00), indicating that respondents generally agree with the statements measuring engagement, authenticity, identity expression, and loyalty. Consumer identity expression has the highest mean (4.18), suggesting that Gen Z strongly uses brands as a form of self-expression.

3.3. Measurement Model Evaluation (Outer Model)

Table 3. Convergent Validity

Variable	Indicator	Loading	AVE
Social Media Engagement	SME1	0.82	0.72
	SME2	0.85	
	SME3	0.88	
Brand Authenticity	BA1	0.84	0.73
	BA2	0.87	
	BA3	0.86	

Consumer Identity Expression	CIE1	0.83	0.74
	CIE2	0.86	
	CIE3	0.89	
Brand Loyalty	BL1	0.85	0.75
	BL2	0.88	
	BL3	0.87	

Source: Data Analysis

All factor loadings exceed 0.70, and AVE values are above 0.50, indicating strong convergent validity. This confirms that the indicators adequately represent their respective constructs.

Table 4. Reliability Test

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
Social Media Engagement	0.87	0.91
Brand Authenticity	0.88	0.92
Consumer Identity Expression	0.89	0.93
Brand Loyalty	0.90	0.93

Source: Data Analysis

All constructs show Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values above 0.70, confirming that the measurement model is reliable and internally consistent.

3.4. Measurement Model Evaluation (Outer Model)

Table 5. Coefficient of Determination (R²)

Variable	R ²
Brand Loyalty	0.68

Source: Data Analysis

The R² value of 0.68 indicates that 68% of the variance in brand loyalty is explained by social media engagement, brand authenticity, and consumer identity expression. This suggests a strong explanatory power of the model.

3.5. Measurement Model Evaluation (Outer Model)

Table 6. Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Social Media Engagement → Brand Loyalty	0.28	3.45	0.001	Supported
H2	Brand Authenticity → Brand Loyalty	0.32	4.10	0.000	Supported
H3	Consumer Identity Expression → Brand Loyalty	0.35	4.55	0.000	Supported

Source: Data Analysis

All hypothesized relationships are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Consumer identity expression has the strongest effect on brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.35$), followed by brand authenticity ($\beta = 0.32$) and social media engagement ($\beta = 0.28$). This indicates that while engagement and

authenticity are important, identity expression plays the most dominant role in shaping brand loyalty among Gen Z.

3.6. Effect Size (f^2)

Table 7. Effect Size

Variable	f^2	Effect Size
Social Media Engagement	0.12	Small
Brand Authenticity	0.15	Medium
Consumer Identity Expression	0.18	Medium

Source: Data Analysis

Consumer identity expression and brand authenticity have moderate effects on brand loyalty, while social media engagement has a smaller effect. This further confirms that psychological and identity-related factors are more influential than mere interaction.

3.7. Predictive Relevance (Q^2)

Table 8. Predictive Relevance

Variable	Q^2
Brand Loyalty	0.52

Source: Data Analysis

The Q^2 value of 0.52 indicates strong predictive relevance, meaning the model has good predictive accuracy in explaining brand loyalty.

3.8. Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the factors influencing brand loyalty among Generation Z, particularly in the context of social media. The results demonstrate that social media engagement, brand authenticity, and consumer identity expression all have significant positive effects on brand loyalty. Among these variables, consumer identity expression emerged as the most influential factor, followed by brand authenticity and social media engagement. These findings align with and extend prior research on digital consumer behavior, emphasizing the growing importance of psychological and identity-driven factors in shaping loyalty among younger consumers.

First, the significant positive effect of social media engagement on brand loyalty confirms that interactive communication between brands and consumers plays a crucial role in fostering long-term relationships. This finding is consistent with previous studies that highlight engagement as a key driver of emotional connection and brand attachment (Yudha et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2022). Gen Z consumers are highly active on social media platforms, and their interactions—such as liking, commenting, and sharing content—contribute to a sense of involvement with the brand. However, the relatively smaller effect size of social media engagement compared to other variables suggests that engagement alone may not be sufficient to guarantee strong loyalty. This supports the argument by Tian and Liu (2026) that engagement must be complemented by deeper psychological factors, such as trust and emotional resonance, to effectively influence loyalty outcomes.

Second, brand authenticity was found to have a significant and moderately strong influence on brand loyalty. This result reinforces the notion that authenticity is a critical

determinant of consumer trust and relationship quality in digital environments. In line with Kaur et al. (2023) and Singh (2026), the findings suggest that consumers are more likely to remain loyal to brands that are perceived as genuine, transparent, and consistent in their values. For Gen Z, authenticity is particularly important due to their skepticism toward traditional advertising and their preference for relatable and honest brand communication. The rise of user-generated content and influencer marketing has further amplified the importance of authenticity, as consumers increasingly rely on peer opinions and real-life experiences when evaluating brands (Lou & Yuan, 2022). Therefore, brands that successfully communicate authenticity are better positioned to build trust and foster long-term loyalty.

Third, the results indicate that consumer identity expression has the strongest influence on brand loyalty among the three variables. This finding highlights the central role of self-concept and identity in shaping consumption behavior among Generation Z. Consistent with Nguyen et al. (2025) and Tran and Nguyen (2026), the study confirms that consumers are more likely to develop strong loyalty toward brands that reflect their personal values, beliefs, and social identity. In the context of social media, identity expression becomes even more prominent, as individuals curate their online personas through the brands they associate with. This behavior is particularly evident among Gen Z, who view consumption not only as a functional activity but also as a means of self-expression and social signaling (Djafarova & Bowes, 2022). As a result, brands that align with consumers' identities can create deeper emotional connections, leading to stronger and more sustainable loyalty.

Furthermore, the combined effect of the three variables explains a substantial proportion of variance in brand loyalty ($R^2 = 0.68$), indicating that the proposed model has strong explanatory power. This suggests that integrating social media engagement, authenticity, and identity expression provides a comprehensive framework for understanding loyalty in the digital age. The high predictive relevance ($Q^2 = 0.52$) further confirms the robustness of the model, indicating that it is capable of accurately predicting consumer behavior. These findings contribute to the existing literature by demonstrating that brand loyalty is not solely driven by transactional or functional factors, but also by relational and symbolic dimensions.

The results also provide important managerial implications for marketers targeting Generation Z. First, while increasing social media engagement remains important, brands should focus on creating meaningful and interactive experiences rather than simply maximizing engagement metrics. This involves encouraging two-way communication, facilitating user-generated content, and fostering a sense of community among consumers. Second, brands must prioritize authenticity in their communication strategies. This can be achieved by maintaining transparency, aligning brand actions with stated values, and avoiding overly promotional or manipulative content. Third, marketers should recognize the importance of identity expression and design branding strategies that resonate with the values and aspirations of their target audience. For example, brands can emphasize social causes, cultural relevance, and personalization to strengthen identity alignment.

In addition, the findings highlight the evolving nature of consumer-brand relationships in the digital era. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z consumers expect brands to play a role in their identity construction and social interactions. This shift requires brands to move beyond traditional marketing approaches and adopt more holistic strategies that integrate emotional, social, and symbolic elements. The growing importance of identity expression also suggests

that future research should explore additional variables, such as brand personality, community belonging, and social influence, to further understand the mechanisms underlying brand loyalty.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of cross-sectional data limits the ability to establish causal relationships over time. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to examine how consumer perceptions and loyalty evolve. Second, the study focuses on Generation Z within a specific context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations or cultural settings. Third, the study does not include potential mediating or moderating variables, such as trust, brand love, or perceived value, which could provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationships.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that social media engagement, brand authenticity, and consumer identity expression are significant predictors of brand loyalty among Generation Z. Among these factors, identity expression plays the most dominant role, highlighting the importance of aligning brand values with consumer self-concept. The findings underscore the need for brands to adopt authentic, engaging, and identity-driven strategies to build strong and lasting relationships with Gen Z consumers in the digital age.

4. Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that social media engagement, brand authenticity, and consumer identity expression are significant determinants of brand loyalty among Generation Z. The findings demonstrate that active and meaningful engagement on social media platforms fosters stronger emotional and cognitive connections between consumers and brands, ultimately enhancing loyalty. Furthermore, perceived brand authenticity emerged as a crucial factor, indicating that Generation Z consumers are more likely to remain loyal to brands they perceive as transparent, genuine, and value-driven. Consumer identity expression also plays a pivotal role, as this generation tends to align with brands that reflect and reinforce their personal values, beliefs, and self-concept. Collectively, these results highlight that brand loyalty in the digital era is not solely driven by traditional marketing efforts but is increasingly shaped by interactive, authentic, and identity-relevant brand experiences. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital consumer behavior by emphasizing the integrated influence of these variables, while also offering practical insights for marketers seeking to build sustainable relationships with Generation Z. Future research is encouraged to explore additional moderating variables and longitudinal effects to further understand the evolving dynamics of brand loyalty in a rapidly changing digital landscape.

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