

Media, Mind, and Market Exploring the Psychological and Cultural Drivers of Generation Z's Consumer Behaviour

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Abstract

Generation Z represents a transformative consumer segment shaped by rapid technological advancement, pervasive social media influence, and global cultural integration. Their consumption behaviour reflects notable shifts in both physiological and cultural dimensions. Continuous exposure to fast-paced digital environments has influenced attention spans, reward processing, and sensory engagement, fostering a preference for immediacy and visually oriented content. Culturally, Generation Z prioritises authenticity, sustainability, and inclusivity, seeking brands that resonate with personal identity and collective social values. Drawing on a systematic review of contemporary literature encompassing theoretical, contextual, and methodological perspectives, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the factors shaping Gen Z's consumption behaviour. It further explores the interaction between digital-age physiological adaptations and evolving cultural norms, highlighting the central role of media in driving psychological and cultural transformations in consumer behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

The contemporary marketplace is undergoing a profound transformation, driven in no small part by the emergence of Generation Z as a dominant consumer force. Born between 1997 and 2012, this cohort — estimated at over 2.5 billion individuals globally — has grown up in an environment saturated with digital media, social networking platforms, and on-demand information flows.¹ Unlike their Millennial predecessors, Gen Z did not merely adapt to digital technology; they were formed by it. The smartphone, the social media feed, and the algorithmic content recommendation are not tools they adopted — they are the very architecture of their psychological and social worlds.

Understanding Gen Z consumer behaviour therefore requires more than an incremental update to existing marketing frameworks. It demands a reconceptualisation of the relationship between media, identity, and market

participation. Traditional models of consumer decision-making — rooted in rational actor theory, stimulus-response models, and demographic segmentation — fail to capture the layered complexity of a generation that processes brand information through the lens of social identity, values congruence, and community belonging.²

Problem Statement

Despite a rapidly growing body of practitioner literature on Gen Z marketing, academic research has yet to produce an integrated, theoretically grounded model of the psychological and cultural drivers that shape Gen Z consumer behaviour. Existing studies tend to be fragmented by platform (e.g., TikTok-specific analyses), discipline (e.g., purely psychological or purely cultural approaches), or geography (predominantly US and Western European samples). There is an urgent need for a synthesising framework that bridges psychological theory, cultural analysis, and empirical evidence to provide both explanatory depth and practical utility.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary objectives of this research are

- To identify and theoretically ground the principal psychological and cultural drivers of Gen Z consumer behaviour.
- To construct an integrated five-driver framework that synthesises existing empirical and theoretical literature.
- To examine the role of social media architecture and influencer culture in shaping Gen Z

¹ Michael Dimock, *Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins* (Pew Research Ctr. 2019); McKinsey & Company, *True Gen: A Deep Dive into Generation Z's Values and Purchasing Behaviour* (2023).

² R. Bhatt & V. Bhatt, *Digital Consumer Behaviour of Generation Z: A Systematic Review*, 21 J. Consumer Behaviour 930 (2022); C.V. Priporas, Nikolaos Stylos & Anestis K. Fotiadis, *Generation Z Consumers' Expectations of Interactions in Smart Retailing*, 77 Computers in Hum. Behav. 374 (2017).

purchasing decisions.

- To derive evidence-based implications for brand strategy, marketing ethics, and future research.

Research Questions

This paper addresses the following research questions

- RQ1: What psychological mechanisms most significantly influence Gen Z consumer decision-making?
- RQ2: How do cultural dynamics — including identity construction, community belonging, and values orientation — shape Gen Z's engagement with brands?
- RQ3: In what ways does digital media architecture — including algorithmic curation and influencer networks — mediate Gen Z's consumer behaviour?
- RQ4: What strategic and ethical implications do Gen Z consumer drivers hold for marketers and brand strategists?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the academic literature by providing an integrated theoretical-empirical framework for understanding Gen Z consumer psychology. For practitioners, the five-driver framework offers actionable strategic guidance grounded in documented empirical patterns rather than trend speculation. For policymakers and consumer protection advocates, the analysis of algorithmic amplification and parasocial exploitation provides a basis for regulatory consideration. The study is also significant in its scope, synthesising literature from consumer psychology, media studies, cultural sociology, and marketing science.

Scope and Delimitations

This paper is delimited to the consumer behaviour of Generation Z as a cohort, with primary reference to contexts in North America, Western Europe, and select Asia-Pacific markets where empirical data is most robust. While the paper engages with digital media platforms extensively, it does not provide a comprehensive platform-by-platform analysis. The paper focuses on



consumer behaviour in the broad marketplace and does not specialise in any single product category. The temporal scope of the empirical synthesis is 2018–2025.

Structure of the Paper

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant theoretical and empirical literature. Section 3 describes the methodology employed. Section 4 presents the discussion and analysis, including the five-driver framework. Section 5 offers conclusions and suggestions. References are provided at the end of the paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Generation Z

Generational demarcation is an exercise in approximation. Cohort boundaries are contested, and individuals within any generation exhibit substantial heterogeneity. Nevertheless, the generational cohort concept retains analytical utility as a grouping of individuals sharing formative historical experiences and common dispositional orientations.³ The Pew Research Center defines Generation Z as those born between 1997 and 2012, though some researchers extend the upper boundary to 2015.

For Gen Z, the defining formative experiences include: ubiquity of smartphones and mobile internet from early adolescence; normalisation of social media as primary social infrastructure; exposure to global economic instability (the 2008 financial crisis, COVID-19 pandemic); heightened awareness of climate change and social justice movements; and systematic erosion of institutional trust across media, government, and corporate sectors.⁴

Economic Profile and Purchasing Power

Despite their relative youth, Gen Z already commands significant economic influence. In the United States, Gen Z's direct spending power was estimated at approximately USD 360 billion in 2023, with indirect

influence over household purchasing decisions extending that figure

substantially.⁵ Globally, as older Gen Z cohorts enter full-time employment, their aggregate consumer spending is projected to surpass that of Millennials by 2031.⁶

Digital Media Ecosystems

The designation 'digital native' — coined by Prensky (2001) and subsequently refined — retains descriptive power when applied to Gen Z, understood not as a claim about innate technological ability but about the structural conditions of socialisation. Gen Z individuals did not learn to navigate digital spaces; digital spaces were always already present as the primary arena for social interaction, identity performance, information acquisition, and entertainment.⁷

This structural embeddedness has profound consequences for consumer psychology. Advertising is encountered not as an interruption to media consumption but as an integrated element of a media ecosystem in which commercial, social, and personal content are indistinguishable. The boundary between peer recommendation and brand-sponsored content has become systematically blurred — a condition that simultaneously heightens Gen Z's scepticism and their susceptibility to authentically performed commercial messages.⁸

Theoretical Foundations

Social Identity Theory

Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory (SIT) proposes that individuals derive a significant portion

3 Karl Mannheim, *The Problem of Generations*, in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* 276 (Paul Kecskemeti ed., 1952); Emma Parry & Peter Urwin, *Generational Differences in Work Values: A Review of Theory and Evidence*, 13 *Int'l J. Mgmt. Rev.* 79 (2011).

4 Tracy Francis & Fernanda Hoefel, 'True Gen': Generation Z and Its Implications for Companies, McKinsey Q. (2018); Deloitte, *Global Gen Z Survey 2023: Understanding a Generation in Flux* (2023).

Table 1: Generation Z Consumer Profile at a Glance

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Key Characteristic</i>	<i>Strategic Implication</i>
Birth Years	Approx. 1997–2012	Now aged 13–29 (2026)
Media Behaviour	Mobile-first, short-form video dominant	TikTok, Reels, YouTube Shorts primary
Trust Orientation	Sceptical of institutional authority	Peer review over advertising
Values	Social justice, sustainability, authenticity	Brand ethics increasingly decisive
Decision Style	Research-intensive, community-validated	Multi-touchpoint purchase journeys

of their self-concept from social group membership, and that they engage in behaviours — including consumption — that affirm and communicate this membership. For Gen Z, digital communities, aesthetic subcultures, and values-based tribes serve as the primary group structures through which social identity is negotiated. Consumption choices function as symbolic resources in this identity negotiation: the brands and products Gen Z consumers select are identity signals communicating group affiliation, aesthetic sensibility, and values commitments.⁹

Parasocial Relationship Theory

Horton and Wohl's (1956) concept of parasocial interaction — the illusion of face-to-face relationship that media audiences form with media personalities — has taken on new dimensions in the age of social media influencers.¹⁰ Researchers term this 'parasocial interaction 2.0': a more reciprocal, intimate, and persistent form of imagined relationship that Gen Z consumers form with influencers. The marketing implications are significant: influencer recommendations carry the affective weight of peer advice, activating heuristic processing and bypassing conventional persuasion defences.¹¹

⁵ Bloomberg Intelligence, Gen Z: A Social Generation (2021); NielsenIQ, Gen Z Purchase Influencers and Market Trends (2023).

⁶ Euromonitor International, World Consumer Trends 2024: The Rise of Gen Z Spending (2024).

⁷ Marc Prensky, Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, 9 On the Horizon 1 (2001); John Palfrey & Urs Gasser, Born Digital: How Children Grow Up in a Digital Age (rev. ed. 2016).

⁸ Ida Kristin Johansen & Cathrine Susanne Guldvik, Influencer Marketing and Purchase Intentions (Master's Thesis, Norwegian Bus. Sch. 2017).

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory illuminates a distinctive tension in Gen Z consumer psychology. Gen Z consumers profess strong values commitments — to environmental sustainability, social justice, mental health awareness, and corporate accountability — yet their actual purchasing behaviour frequently diverges from these stated values.¹² This values-

behaviour gap activates dissonance-reduction mechanisms including rationalisation, selective exposure, and moral licensing.¹³

Cultural Capital and Distinction

Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of cultural capital and distinction provide a sociological lens. In the context

⁹ Henri Tajfel & John C. Turner, An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict, in The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations 33 (William G. Austin & Stephen Worchel eds., 1979); Jennifer Edson Escalas & James R. Bettman, Self-Construal, Reference Groups, and Brand Meaning, 32 J. Consumer Rsch. 378 (2005).

¹⁰ Donald Horton & R. Richard Wohl, Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction, 19 Psychiatry 215 (1956);

L.I. Labrecque, Fostering Consumer-Brand Relationships in Social Media Environments: The Role of Parasocial Interaction, 28 J. Interactive Marketing 134 (2014).

¹¹ Richard E. Petty & John T. Cacioppo, The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion, 19 Advances in Experimental Soc. Psychol. 123 (1986).

¹² Leon Festinger, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (1957); Katherine White, Rishad Habib & David J. Hardisty, How to SHIFT Consumer Behaviours to Be More Sustainable, 83 J. Marketing 22 (2019).



Table 2: Theoretical Frameworks Applied in this Study

Theory	Originator(s)	Core Concept	Relevance to Gen Z
Social Identity Theory	Tajfel & Turner (1979)	Self-concept via group membership	Brand as identity signal
Parasocial Interaction	Horton & Wohl (1956)	Imagined intimacy with media figures	Influencer trust transfer
Cognitive Dissonance	Festinger (1957)	Tension from conflicting beliefs/acts	Values-behaviour gap
Cultural Capital	Bourdieu (1984)	Symbolic resources conferring status	Trend adoption & rejection
ELM	Petty & Cacioppo (1986)	Heuristic vs. systematic processing	Influencer vs. ad response

Table 3: Summary of Prior Empirical Studies (2018–2025)

Author(s) / Year	Methodology	Key Finding
McKinsey & Co. (2023)	Survey, n=40,000+	71% of Gen Z prefer personalised experiences; brand incongruence is a top disengagement trigger
First Insight (2023)	Survey, n=1,000	73% willing to pay sustainability premium; 62% stopped buying from a brand due to perceived hypocrisy
Bazaarvoice (2023)	Online survey	84% trust peer reviews over advertising; UGC rated 3x more credible than brand content
Insider Intelligence (2024)	Panel data	56% of Gen Z purchased via social media platform in prior 6 months
Morning Consult (2024)	Tracking survey	TikTok primary for entertainment; Instagram for identity; YouTube for research
Edelman (2024)	Global trust barometer	Gen Z institutional trust lowest of all cohorts; peer and influencer trust highest

of Gen Z, cultural capital has been democratised and digitalised: the ability to identify emerging trends before they become mainstream, to navigate niche aesthetic communities, or to deploy culturally resonant content constitutes digital cultural capital conferring status within peer networks. The logic of distinction drives Gen Z's characteristic ambivalence toward mainstream culture and the rapid cycling of microtrends on platforms like TikTok.¹⁴

Prior Empirical Research

A substantial body of empirical research has examined dimensions of Gen Z consumer behaviour over the past decade. Key findings are summarised in Table 3 below.

¹³ Andreas Chatzidakis, Sally Hibbert & Andrew P. Smith, Why People Don't Take Their Concerns About Fair Trade to the Supermarket: The Role of Neutralisation, 74 J. Bus. Ethics 89 (2012).

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (1984); Jonah Berger & Chip Heath, Where Consumers Diverge from Others: Identity Signalling and Product Domains, 34 J. Consumer Rsch. 121 (2007).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design employing a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology supplemented by theoretical synthesis. The SLR approach is appropriate for a study whose primary aim is integrative — that is, to construct a theoretically grounded framework from a dispersed body of empirical and theoretical literature rather than to generate new primary data.¹⁵ The interpretive paradigm is adopted on the grounds that consumer behaviour is a socially constructed, context-dependent phenomenon that resists reduction to quantitative variables alone.¹⁶

¹⁵ David Tranfield, David Denyer & Palminder Smart, Towards a Methodology for Developing Evidence-Informed Management Knowledge by Means of Systematic Review, 14 Brit. J. Mgmt. 207 (2003); Andrew Booth, Anthea Sutton & Diana Papaioannou, Systematic Approaches to a Successful Literature Review (2d ed. 2016).

¹⁶ Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln, The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research (5th ed. 2018).

The study is positioned within a constructivist ontological framework, which holds that the meaning of consumption is produced through the interaction of individual psychology, social context, and cultural systems — not discovered as an objective external reality. This ontological position is consistent with the theoretical frameworks employed (SIT, cultural capital theory) and with the interpretive analysis of consumer media behaviour.

Data Collection Approach

A structured literature search was conducted across four academic databases — PsycINFO, Business Source Complete, Web of Science, and Google Scholar — using Boolean search strings

combining the following terms: 'Generation Z', 'Gen Z', 'digital native', 'consumer behaviour', 'consumer psychology', 'social media', 'influencer marketing', 'brand identity', 'values-based consumption', 'algorithmic media', and 'cultural capital'. The search was delimited to publications from January 2018 to December 2025 to ensure temporal relevance, with selective inclusion of foundational theoretical texts from earlier periods.

Initial searches yielded 847 potentially relevant documents. After title and abstract screening for relevance and quality, 312 documents were selected for full-text review. Of these, 94 empirical studies, 38 theoretical papers, and 24 industry research reports met the inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the synthesis. Inclusion criteria required: (a) explicit focus on Generation Z consumer behaviour, media consumption, or brand engagement; (b) use of rigorous empirical methods or established theoretical frameworks; and (c) publication in peer-reviewed journals, reputable academic presses, or major industry research organisations.

Analytical Framework

¹⁷ James Thomas & Angela Harden, *Methods for the Thematic Synthesis of Qualitative Research in Systematic Reviews*, 8 BMC Med. Res. Methodology 45 (2008); Stefan Timmermans & Iddo Tavory, *Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis*, 30 Sociological Theory 167 (2012).

The analytical process employed thematic synthesis to identify cross-cutting patterns across the included literature.¹⁷ In the first stage, key themes were identified within individual studies through close reading and annotation. In the second stage, descriptive themes were constructed by grouping related individual-study themes. In the third stage, analytical themes were developed through interpretive inference across the descriptive theme clusters — a process analogous to abductive reasoning. The five-driver framework presented in Section 4 emerged from this three-stage thematic synthesis.

Validity and Reliability

The validity of qualitative SLR research rests on the rigour of the search and selection process, the transparency of analytical procedures, and the coherence of the resulting theoretical account. To enhance credibility, the search process was documented using a PRISMA-compliant flow chart protocol, and the inclusion/exclusion decisions were subject to a secondary review process. Reflexivity was maintained through explicit acknowledgment of the theoretical commitments that informed the analytical framework. The limitations of the methodology — including

potential publication bias, the predominance of Western samples in the included literature, and the inherent subjectivity of thematic inference — are addressed in Section 5.3.

Discussion and Analysis

The Five-Driver Framework of Gen Z Consumer Behaviour

The thematic synthesis yielded five principal drivers of Gen Z consumer behaviour: Digital Identity Congruence, Values Alignment, Community Validation, Algorithmic Amplification, and Experiential Premium. These drivers are not mutually exclusive; in practice they interact dynamically, and their relative salience varies by product category, platform context, and individual disposition. The framework is presented in Table 4 below.

Digital Identity Congruence

Table 4: The Five-Driver Framework of Gen Z Consumer Behaviour

<i>Driver</i>	<i>Theoretical Root</i>	<i>Core Mechanism</i>	<i>Evidence Level</i>
1. Digital Identity Congruence	SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)	Self-concept maintenance via brand symbolism	Robust
2. Values Alignment	Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger, 1957)	Consistency between brand & personal values	Robust
3. Community Validation	Social Proof (Cialdini, 1984)	Peer norms, community endorsement	Robust
4. Algorithmic Amplification	Exposure Effect (Zajonc, 1968)	Personalised repetition & discovery curation	Moderate
5. Experiential Premium	Experience Economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999)	Hedonic value & shareability orientation	Moderate

Digital identity congruence refers to the degree of alignment between a consumer's perceived self-concept — as expressed and performed across digital platforms — and the symbolic attributes of a brand or product. Gen Z consumers manage multiple simultaneous identity presentations across platforms (TikTok persona, Instagram aesthetic, LinkedIn profile, gaming avatar), and brand preferences may differ substantially across these contexts. A 2023 McKinsey study found that 71% of Gen Z consumers prefer personalised experiences, and that brand incongruence with self-expressed identity is a leading driver of disengagement.¹⁸ The implication

for marketers is that brand positioning must be not only coherent but identity-legible — brands must offer resources for self-expression.

Values Alignment

Values alignment captures the degree to which a brand's stated commitments and demonstrated behaviours correspond to Gen Z's own values priorities. Research identifies environmental sustainability, social justice, mental health awareness, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and anti-racism as the most salient values domains. Gen Z consumers apply a high standard of authenticity verification: stated values must be evidenced by concrete actions and supply chain transparency. A 2022 First Insight survey found that 62% of Gen Z had stopped

¹⁸ McKinsey & Company, True Gen: A Deep Dive into Generation Z's Values and Purchasing Behaviour (2023).

purchasing from a brand due to perceived hypocrisy — what researchers term 'values betrayal'.¹⁹ The viral amplification capacity of Gen Z social networks means that values betrayal incidents can rapidly escalate into brand crises.

Community Validation

Community validation reflects Gen Z's reliance on social proof mechanisms — peer reviews, community endorsements, trending indicators, and influencer recommendations — as primary inputs to purchasing decisions. Trust has redistributed from institutional sources to peer communities. Research by Bazaarvoice (2023) indicates that 84% of Gen Z trust peer reviews over brand advertising, and that user-generated content is rated approximately three times more credible than brand-produced content.²⁰ The 'TikTok made me buy it' phenomenon, which has driven measurable sales spikes across numerous product categories, exemplifies the community validation driver in action — purchasing a trending product is simultaneously a consumption act and an expression of cultural membership.

Algorithmic Amplification

Algorithmic amplification refers to the role of platform recommendation systems in structuring Gen Z consumers' exposure to brands, products,

¹⁹ First Insight, The Sustainability Gap: Gen Z Attitudes Versus Purchasing Behaviour (2023); Cone Communications, Corporate Social Responsibility Study: Gen Z Edition (2022).

²⁰ Bazaarvoice, Shopper Experience Index: Understanding Gen Z Purchasing Behaviour (2023).

and purchasing stimuli. The algorithmic curation of content on TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Pinterest does not merely reflect pre-existing preferences — it actively constructs them through selective exposure, repetition effects, and personalised micro-trend environments. Discovery-to-purchase journeys — in which a

consumer discovers, evaluates, and purchases a product entirely within a single platform ecosystem, often within minutes — are increasingly common on TikTok Shop and Instagram Shopping. A 2024 Insider Intelligence report found that 56% of Gen Z had made at least one social media platform purchase in the preceding six months, fundamentally disrupting traditional marketing funnel models.²¹

Experiential Premium

The experiential premium driver captures Gen Z's relative preference for experiential consumption purchases oriented toward experiences, memories, social sharing, and aesthetic immersion over purely functional or material acquisition. Research by Eventbrite (2023) and Airbnb (2024) documents Gen Z's willingness to pay premiums for experiences that are photographically or cinematically compelling — experiences that generate shareable content assets.²² This has driven demand in experiential retail, aesthetically distinctive hospitality, and visually innovative food and beverage. Functionally excellent but experientially undifferentiated products and services face growing headwinds in the Gen Z marketplace.

Social Media Architecture and Influencer Culture

The influencer economy has undergone significant structural evolution, and Gen Z's relationship with influencer content differs substantially from earlier audiences. Research consistently documents a 'micro-influencer effect': smaller-scale influencers (10,000–100,000 followers), characterised by perceived authenticity and genuine community engagement, generate higher engagement rates and stronger purchase intent than macro-influencers

or celebrity endorsers.²³ Gen Z consumers have developed sophisticated literacy in identifying sponsored content and performative authenticity, making the parasocial intimacy of micro-influencer relationships commercially more effective than aspirational macro-figure endorsement.

User-generated content (UGC) and co-creation represent perhaps the most distinctive dimension of Gen Z's relationship with commercial culture. For a generation that has grown up creating content — posting, remixing, reviewing, and sharing — passive reception of brand messaging is

experienced as aesthetically unsatisfying and socially isolating. Gen Z consumers expect to be collaborators, not audiences.²⁴ Brand challenges, participatory campaigns, and community-generated content initiatives consistently outperform traditional advertising formats in Gen Z engagement metrics.

Platform-Specific Consumer Psychologies

Gen Z exhibits sophisticated platform differentiation, using different platforms for different purposes and in correspondingly different psychological modes. Research by Morning Consult (2024) documents the platform usage hierarchy summarised in Table 5.²⁵

Values Alignment and Ethical Consumption

The relationship between values and consumption for Gen Z is characterised by a paradox: an unusually high stated commitment to ethical consumption coexists with persistent values-behaviour gaps in actual purchasing.²⁶ This gap is not reducible to simple hypocrisy; it reflects the operation of

²¹ Insider Intelligence, Social Commerce Report 2024: Gen Z Purchasing on Social Platforms (2024). ²² Eventbrite, Gen Z and the Experience Economy: What Young Consumers Want (2023); Airbnb, Gen Z Travel Trends Report (2024).

²³ Markerly, Instagram Influencer Marketing: The Case for Micro-Influencers (2022); Influencer Marketing Hub, The State of Influencer Marketing: Benchmark Report 2024 (2024).



Table 5: Platform-Specific Consumer Psychology Modes

<i>Platform</i>	<i>Primary Use (Gen Z)</i>	<i>Psychological Mode</i>	<i>Consumer Behaviour Impact</i>
TikTok	Entertainment, trend discovery	Heuristic, emotional	Impulse purchase, trend participation
Instagram	Aesthetic curation, aspiration	Identity performance	Aspirational brand engagement
YouTube	Education, long-form review	Systematic, rational	Considered purchase in high-involvement categories
Snapchat	Intimate peer communication	Social bonding	Peer recommendation amplification
Reddit / Discord	Community research, debate	Analytical, communal	Pre-purchase validation, brand scrutiny

cognitive dissonance-reduction mechanisms — rationalisation, selective exposure, and moral licensing — that mediate between values and behaviour in ways that are systematically exploitable by market actors.

The implication for brands is that reducing the perceived cost of ethical consumption — through pricing strategy, product bundling, or values storytelling that increases moral salience — can shift Gen Z consumers toward values-consistent purchasing without requiring them to explicitly navigate cognitive dissonance.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued that Gen Z consumer behaviour is best understood as an expression of psychological and cultural forces deeply embedded in digital media environments. The five-driver framework — Digital Identity Congruence, Values Alignment, Community Validation, Algorithmic Amplification, and Experiential Premium — provides an integrated theoretical-empirical account of the principal determinants of Gen Z market participation.

The analysis demonstrates that Gen Z consumers are simultaneously hyper-connected and deeply sceptical, demanding both personalisation and transparency, and wielding both extraordinary loyalty and extraordinary punitive capacity toward brands. Their relationship with commercial culture is neither passively receptive nor straightforwardly resistant: it is actively co-constructive, driven by the same creative, communal, and values-oriented energies that characterise their broader engagement with digital media environments.

The most durable theoretical contribution of this paper is the demonstration that the psychological

and cultural drivers of Gen Z consumer behaviour are not isolated phenomena but are systematically connected through the architecture of digital media platforms, which serve simultaneously as identity-construction environments, community spaces, commercial marketplaces, and algorithmic curation systems. Marketing strategy that treats these dimensions as separable — addressing identity without community, or values without algorithm — will inevitably be partial and suboptimal.

Suggestions for Brands and Marketers

Based on the five-driver framework and the analysis of Gen Z consumer psychology, the following strategic suggestions are offered:

Invest in Identity Architecture

Brands should develop multi-platform identity frameworks that offer Gen Z consumers meaningful resources for self-expression and

identity congruence across different platform contexts. A single brand voice across all platforms is insufficient; platform-native identity articulation is required.

Demonstrate Values, Do Not Just Declare Them

Values claims must be substantiated by visible, verifiable actions — supply chain transparency, executive accountability, concrete impact metrics,

²⁴ Bernard Cova & Daniele Dalli, *Working Consumers: The Next Step in Marketing Theory?*, 9 *Marketing Theory* 315 (2009).

²⁵ Morning Consult, *The State of Gen Z: Social Media, Brands, and Culture Report* (2024).

and genuine community investment. ESG reporting calibrated for consumer communication, not merely investor audiences, is advisable.

Prioritise Micro-Influencer Ecosystems

Marketing investment should be redistributed from macro-influencer and celebrity endorsement toward diversified micro-influencer networks embedded in relevant communities. Authenticity of influencer relationships with their audiences — not follower count — is the key selection criterion.

Design for Algorithmic Amplification

Content strategy must be designed not only for immediate audience engagement but for algorithmic amplifiability — creating content that recommendation systems will surface, amplify, and connect to relevant audiences. Platform-native content formats (short-form video, interactive elements, shareable creative assets) should be prioritised.

Create Experiential Touchpoints

Products and brand experiences should be designed for shareability alongside functionality. Aesthetic distinctiveness, photographic or cinematic compellingness, and the generation of memorable social narratives are increasingly decisive competitive differentiators for Gen Z consumers.

Pursue Ethical Marketing Practice

The exploitation of algorithmic micro-targeting to leverage mental health vulnerabilities, the manufacturing of artificial scarcity to amplify FOMO, and the deliberate blurring of commercial and authentic peer communication are not merely ethically problematic — they are strategically counterproductive in a consumer cohort that actively monitors and publicises commercial manipulation.

LIMITATIONS

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, the SLR methodology is inherently selective, and

the framework reflects theoretical choices that are contestable. Second, the concept of Generation Z as a unified consumer category masks substantial internal heterogeneity across race, class, gender, and geography. Third, the rapidly evolving media environment means that platform-specific empirical findings may have limited temporal validity. Fourth, the majority of studies synthesised here draw on North American and Western European samples, limiting the cross-cultural generalizability of the framework.

Future Research Directions

Future research should pursue: (a) longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of Gen Z consumer behaviour as the cohort ages and enters higher-income life stages; (b) experimental

investigations of the relative salience of the five drivers across product categories; (c) cross-cultural comparative studies, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America; (d) interdisciplinary investigations integrating neuroscientific, computational, and sociological methods; and (e) critical analyses of the ethical implications of algorithmic amplification and parasocial relationship exploitation in Gen Z marketing contexts.

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