



The Role of Social Media Engagement in Shaping Brand Perception Among Gen Z Consumers

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Abstract

This study explores how social media engagement influences brand perception among Generation Z consumers in Indonesia. As a generation deeply immersed in digital culture, Gen Z perceives brands not merely through products but through digital interactions that reflect authenticity, values, and creativity. The research aims to identify the key dimensions of social media engagement—active interaction, visual content, authenticity, and influencer roles—and examine how these dimensions shape brand perception through the mediating factors of brand experience and brand trust. Using a qualitative approach through a systematic literature review, data were collected from peer-reviewed studies published between 2019 and 2024. Thematic analysis was applied to synthesize findings from multiple sources. Results indicate that active engagement (likes, comments, and shares) enhances emotional attachment and brand relevance; visual consistency strengthens aesthetic connection; authenticity fosters trust and transparency; and influencer credibility plays a key mediating role in building brand credibility. Furthermore, the study highlights that brand experience partially mediates the effect of social media engagement on brand perception, while brand trust fully mediates authenticity and influencer relationships. These findings offer practical insights for Indonesian marketers seeking to strengthen Gen Z loyalty through authentic, value-driven, and culturally resonant digital strategies.



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INTRODUCTION

Generation Z—born roughly between 1997 and 2012—has grown up in a digital era where social media is not only a means of communication but also an integral part of daily life (Hidayati, 2023). Due to their high level of social media usage and digital interaction, Gen Z consumers are constantly exposed to brand messages through content, influencers, and personalized advertising (Al Akromi, 2024). Brand perception among Gen Z is shaped not only by the physical attributes of a product but also by how a brand presents and interacts through social media—ranging from content quality and authenticity to the values embedded in brand storytelling (Al Akromi, 2024). Furthermore, Gen Z tends to prefer interactive content, user-generated materials, and authentic

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brand experiences on social media, which have been linked to greater brand trust and loyalty (Putri et al., 2024; Tan et al., 2023).

A brand is a unique identity that differentiates a product, service, or organization from its competitors. More than just a name, logo, or symbol, a brand encompasses the perceptions, emotions, and experiences that consumers associate with it. According to Keller and Swaminathan (2023), a brand functions as a means of creating positive associations in the minds of consumers, ultimately fostering loyalty and adding value to the company (Keller, 2013). A strong brand provides a competitive advantage, enhances consumer trust, and influences purchasing decisions. Therefore, brand building and management strategies are essential components of modern marketing practices.

Furthermore, a brand is now regarded as an intangible asset with significant economic value. A study by Bae & Kim (2023) emphasizes that a brand is not merely a communication tool but also a symbol of the emotional relationship between a company and its customers (Bae & Kim, 2023). In the digital era, brand strength is increasingly shaped by consumer experiences across various platforms, including social media. Positive interactions and consistent brand messaging play a crucial role in maintaining reputation and relevance amid changing consumer behavior. Thus, effective brand management requires a deep understanding of consumer behavior, innovative communication, and a commitment to authenticity and brand values.

The growth of technology and internet penetration in Indonesia has expanded Gen Z's access to social media, making it a primary platform for brands to communicate and build their image (Ginting & Hadikusuma, 2024). Marketers increasingly recognize that influencers, visual content, and digital communication strategies play crucial roles in attracting Gen Z's attention and shaping their initial brand perceptions (Erwin et al., 2023). Despite widespread digital marketing practices, there is still limited empirical research that systematically explores how different dimensions of social media engagement—such as interaction, visual content, and authenticity—collectively influence brand perception among Gen Z consumers in Indonesia.

In particular, within the local fashion and cosmetics industries, domestic brands face significant challenges in competing with global brands—not only in product quality but especially in how they are perceived by Gen Z through social media (Suwandi & Balqiah, 2023). For instance, both firm-created content and user-generated content have been shown to influence brand attitudes and consumer beliefs about global brand citizenship among Gen Z, which in turn affects purchase intention and brand loyalty (Tan et al., 2023). Moreover, content quality and influencer partnerships frequently emerge as mediating factors between social media use and brand perception outcomes (Ashdaq et al., 2024).

Interactions between brands and consumers on social media—such as comments, likes, shares, and direct feedback—provide valuable opportunities to shape Gen Z's brand experience, which subsequently affects brand equity and trust (Hidayati, 2023). As Gen Z becomes more critical of authenticity, sustainability, and social values, a brand's digital reputation on social media becomes an essential aspect of their overall perception (Al Akromi, 2024; Putri et al., 2024). Therefore, understanding the mechanisms through which social media engagement shapes brand perception is vital for brands to design effective and value-driven digital communication strategies tailored to the preferences and expectations of Gen Z in Indonesia.

This study is urgent because of the rapid behavioral changes among Gen Z consumers and their dominant use of social media as a primary source of information and social interaction. Without empirical insights into how social media engagement influences brand perception in this generation, both local and global brands risk losing strategic opportunities to build loyalty, maintain relevance, and achieve competitive advantage in Indonesia's increasingly digital and competitive marketplace.

Previous studies have explored related aspects of this topic. Rahmawati and Hidayati (2023), for example, examined the influence of Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) on brand equity with brand experience and trust as mediating variables in the context of Muslim fashion among Gen Z consumers (Hidayati, 2023). Similarly, Tan et al. (2023) investigated The Effects of Social Media Communication on Gen Z Consumers' Perception of Local Streetwear Brands in Indonesia, finding that firm-created and user-generated content positively affected brand attitudes and purchase intention through global brand citizenship beliefs (Tan et al., 2023). While these studies offer valuable insights, few have comprehensively examined how the various dimensions of social media engagement—such as interactivity, authenticity, visual content, and influencer roles—jointly shape Gen Z's brand perception.

Based on the background and identified research gaps, this study aims to: (1) identify how different dimensions of social media engagement (active engagement, visual content, authenticity, and influencer roles) influence brand perception among Gen Z consumers in Indonesia; (2) analyze the mediating roles of brand experience and brand trust in the relationship between social media engagement and brand perception; and (3) provide strategic recommendations for local brands to build positive brand perception in an increasingly competitive social media landscape.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a literature study (systematic literature review) design. The qualitative method is chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of social media engagement and its role in shaping brand perception among Generation Z consumers based on existing scientific literature. A literature study allows the researcher to identify, review, and synthesize findings from previous studies relevant to the research topic (Snyder, 2019). Through this approach, the researcher can build a comprehensive conceptual and theoretical understanding of how different dimensions of social media engagement—such as interactivity, content authenticity, influencer roles, and user experience—contribute to brand perception formation.

Data Sources

The data in this research are secondary data obtained from scholarly publications such as peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, research reports, and academic books published between 2019 and 2024. Literature sources were collected from reputable databases including Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, ResearchGate, and national repositories such as Garuda and DOAJ Indonesia. The selection process was carried out using specific keywords such as “social media engagement,” “brand perception,” “Generation Z,” and “digital marketing.” The inclusion criteria ensured that selected studies were empirically or conceptually related to the role of social media in influencing brand perception in both global and Indonesian contexts (Webster & Watson, 2002).

Data Collection Techniques

The data collection process involved several systematic stages:

1. identifying relevant literature using pre-defined keywords;
2. screening articles based on inclusion criteria such as relevance, credibility, and publication year;
3. conducting an in-depth reading of the selected literature to extract core findings related to social media engagement and brand perception; and
4. organizing the extracted information into thematic categories for analysis (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007). This procedure follows principles of transparency and replicability to ensure conceptual validity and methodological rigor in the synthesis process.

Data Analysis Method

The data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, a qualitative technique used to identify recurring patterns, themes, and relationships among key concepts across the reviewed literature (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Each selected study was examined to extract insights regarding the dimensions of social media engagement that influence brand perception, including interactivity, authenticity, trust, and user participation. The analysis process was iterative—data were continuously reviewed, compared, and refined to ensure consistency and depth of interpretation. Thematic mapping was then employed to synthesize findings into an integrated conceptual framework that reflects the collective understanding of how social media engagement shapes brand perception among Generation Z consumers.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Social Media Engagement Dimensions on Brand Perception

Based on the results of a review of various studies, it was found that four main dimensions of social media engagement (active, visual, authenticity, and influencer) have a significant influence on the formation of Gen Z brand perceptions:

Table 1. Literature Findings

Dimensions	Key Findings	Impact on Brand Perception
Active Engagement (likes, comments, shares)	Gen Z perceives brands as more credible and relevant when they can interact directly (two-way comments, polls, Q&A).	Increase brand relevance and emotional attachment.
Visual Content	Consistent and aesthetic visual content strengthens brand personality.	Increase brand familiarity and aesthetic resonance.
Content Authenticity	Content that is honest, not exaggerated, and reflects the brand's reality is considered more trustworthy.	Strengthening brand trust and brand transparency.
The Role of Influencers	Local influencers with value congruence are more effective in fostering positive perceptions.	Mediating between engagement and brand credibility.

The Mediating Role of Brand Experience and Brand Trust

The connection between social media engagement and brand perception is rarely direct; instead, it is mediated by how consumers experience and trust the brand. In the context of Indonesia's Generation Z, these two variables play crucial psychological roles in transforming digital interaction into meaningful and enduring brand perception.

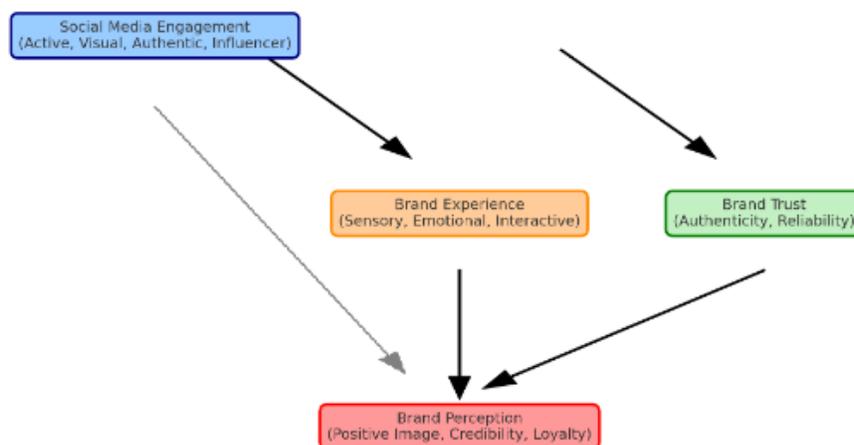


Figure 1. Mediating Role of Brand Experience and Brand Trust in Social Media Engagement

According to (Brakus et al., 2009) in the *Journal of Marketing*, *brand experience* encompasses sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral responses that occur when consumers interact with a brand. When Gen Z consumers engage actively with branded social media content—through comments, “duet challenges,” or story shares—they are not merely consuming information but forming emotional and sensory experiences that shape their perception of the brand. For instance, Tokopedia’s “*Waktu Indonesia Belanja*” campaign utilized interactive and visually appealing content, creating a strong emotional experience among Indonesian youth. Sa’diya, (2017) found that such immersive brand experiences strengthen emotional bonds and improve positive brand perception among Gen Z consumers in Indonesia (Sa’diya, 2017).

Moreover, *brand trust* functions as a psychological bridge connecting digital engagement with brand perception. Iglesias, Markovic, and Rialp (2020) in the *Journal of Business Research* argue that brand trust emerges when consumers perceive a brand as authentic and reliable. On social media, authenticity of content and influencer credibility are critical factors. A recent study by (Abbas et al., 2025) published in *Paradoks: Jurnal Ilmu Ekonomi* found that *influencer credibility* and *digital interactivity* significantly influence *brand trust*, which in turn enhances *brand loyalty* among Indonesia’s Gen Z consumers .

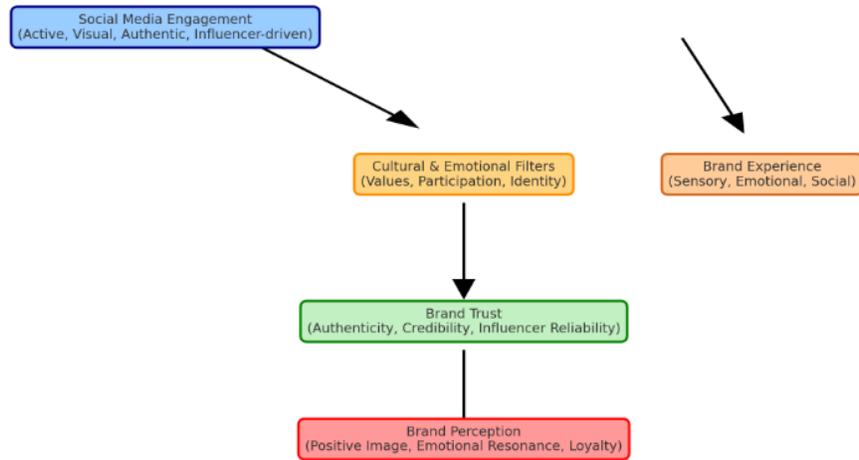
A real example can be seen in *Scarlett Whitening’s* Instagram campaigns, which rely on local influencers who communicate in an honest and relatable manner. This authenticity fosters trust among young audiences. Once this trust is established, social media engagement evolves into positive brand perception—not simply because of attractive content, but because the brand resonates with the consumers’ values and identity.

In terms of mediation, *brand experience* often acts as a partial mediator, meaning active engagement on social media evokes emotional experiences that strengthen brand perception. In contrast, *brand trust* frequently serves as a full mediator, especially concerning content authenticity and influencer credibility. Without trust, the impact of engagement tends to be superficial and short-lived (Alrubaian et al., 2018). Therefore, meaningful digital engagement must aim to create positive experiences and foster sustained trust in the brand.

Contextual Discussion in Indonesia

In the Indonesian Gen Z context, social media engagement plays a deeply cultural and psychological role in shaping how young consumers perceive and emotionally connect with brands.

Unlike previous generations, Gen Z consumers are not satisfied with passive exposure to advertising messages — they actively participate, co-create, and evaluate the authenticity of brand communication on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter). This active participation reshapes the dynamics between brands and audiences, giving rise to a more dialogical form of branding.



Note: Model shows how engagement on social media (e.g., TikTok, Instagram) transforms into positive brand perception through cultural identity, emotional experience, and brand trust among Gen Z consumers in Indonesia.

Figure 2. Conceptual Model: How Social Media Engagement Shapes Brand Perception Among Gen Z in Indonesia

Research by (Kusuma et al., 2024) highlights that interactive participation—such as commenting, creating duets, or remixing brand content—has a significantly stronger effect on brand perception than passive viewing. This is because participation triggers emotional engagement, making consumers feel personally involved in the brand narrative. For example, the viral *“Shopee Live Shopping Festival”* campaign in 2023 encouraged users to engage directly with influencers during live sessions, resulting in not only higher conversion rates but also improved brand image due to perceived transparency and accessibility.

Moreover, Gen Z consumers in Indonesia place strong emphasis on social values embedded in brand messaging. Studies by (Brudie, 2019) demonstrate that brands perceived as socially responsible — those advocating for inclusivity, environmental sustainability, or mental health awareness — are more likely to be viewed as authentic and trustworthy. Campaigns such as *Tokopedia’s “Women in Tech”* initiative or *Wardah’s “Beauty Moves You”* program illustrate this phenomenon. These campaigns integrate social narratives with brand identity, creating a sense of shared purpose that resonates with young audiences who value both self-expression and social contribution.

Authenticity also emerges as a crucial dimension in Gen Z’s evaluation of brands on social media. Hidayat et al. (2024) found that micro-influencers (those with 10,000–100,000 followers) tend to be perceived as more credible than mega-influencers because of their relatability and genuine interaction with followers. For instance, *Scarlett Whitening* strategically collaborates with micro-influencers who showcase their daily routines authentically, allowing followers to perceive their

endorsements as personal recommendations rather than paid promotions. This authenticity drives emotional attachment and fosters long-term trust in the brand.

Additionally, the visual storytelling style prevalent on TikTok and Instagram Reels amplifies brand experience by blending entertainment and authenticity. According to Wijaya and Hamzah (2024), short-form videos with local humor, cultural nuances, or behind-the-scenes content enhance *brand intimacy*—a sense of closeness that strengthens brand perception among young consumers. One prominent case is *Indomie's "Taste of Home"* campaign, which leveraged nostalgic visuals and user-generated videos celebrating Indonesian identity. This approach reinforced positive brand perception through shared cultural experiences rather than direct persuasion.

Altogether, these dynamics show that Gen Z consumers in Indonesia perceive brands as *social actors* rather than commercial entities. They reward brands that participate in meaningful cultural conversations, demonstrate empathy, and maintain authentic engagement. Consequently, successful social media strategies in Indonesia increasingly rely on balancing entertainment with authenticity, influencer credibility with relatability, and brand messaging with social purpose.

Strategic Recommendations for Local Brand Marketers

1. Promote Authentic Engagement

Encourage two-way interaction through polls, duet challenges, and user-generated content to make consumers co-creators of the brand narrative.

2. Maintain Visual Consistency

Use cohesive color schemes, typography, and storytelling that reflect brand identity while staying authentic and relatable to Gen Z aesthetics.

3. Collaborate with Value-Aligned Influencers

Choose micro-influencers who share the brand's values and communicate authentically, rather than focusing solely on follower count.

4. Design Immersive Brand Experiences

Develop interactive campaigns (AR filters, gamified content, or behind-the-scenes videos) that evoke emotion and participation.

5. Build Long-Term Trust Through Transparency

Respond openly to customer feedback and show accountability to foster credibility and strengthen brand loyalty.

6. Focus on Cultural Resonance

Integrate social values (sustainability, inclusivity, or empowerment) that align with Gen Z's identity and moral expectations.

By applying these strategies, local Indonesian brands can enhance emotional connection, trust, and loyalty — transforming social media engagement into sustainable brand equity.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that social media engagement plays a fundamental role in shaping how Gen Z consumers perceive and emotionally connect with brands. Engagement that emphasizes authenticity, consistent visual storytelling, and influencer credibility fosters trust and deeper brand attachment. Meaningful online interaction is not merely transactional but relational, transforming digital experiences into brand loyalty.

Brands should design interactive campaigns that encourage participation, authenticity, and shared values. Collaborations with micro-influencers who align with brand ethics can create stronger emotional connections. Furthermore, brands need to maintain transparency, respond to feedback

openly, and integrate social or cultural narratives to resonate with Gen Z's identity and social consciousness.

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which may not capture the most recent shifts in consumer behavior or algorithmic changes in social media platforms. The qualitative synthesis also focuses on Indonesian and global contexts without empirical testing of variables, limiting the generalizability of results.

Future studies should adopt mixed-method or quantitative approaches to empirically test the proposed conceptual framework. Longitudinal research examining how changes in social media trends affect Gen Z's brand perception over time would also deepen understanding. Expanding comparative studies across cultures could provide richer insights into the global diversity of digital brand engagement patterns.

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