

Digital Natives and Marketing Communication: How Gen Z Responds to Short-Form Video Content

Dr Evangelia D. Parisi

Department of Digital Media and Communication, Ionian University, Argostoli, Kefalonia, Greece

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56293/IJMSSSR.2025.5903>

IJMSSSR 2025

VOLUME 7

ISSUE 6 NOVEMBER - DECEMBER

ISSN: 2582 – 0265

Abstract: This study examines how Generation Z, as digital natives, responds to short form video content (e.g. TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts) in marketing communication. The research investigates behavioral responses, preferences regarding authenticity and trust, and the impact of short-form content on purchase intentions and brand recall. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach a quantitative survey among Gen Z users and qualitative content analysis of viral short videos, this article identifies key factors that enhance engagement, such as relatability of influencers, perceived authenticity, entertainment value, and the ability of short videos to deliver information quickly.

Empirical evidence supports that influencer relatability and trust signals significantly influence purchase intentions among Gen Z in short-form video marketing contexts. For example, a study in Indonesia found that influencer relatability had the strongest effect on Gen Z's purchase intention when engaging with short-form video marketing.

In another work, trends on TikTok that are viewed as authentic and trustworthy were shown to have strong impact on buying decisions of Gen Z.

Furthermore, this study explores how the algorithmic recommendation system and user engagement patterns affect content reach and retention. Prior research analyzing user engagement with TikTok's recommendation and video consumption behavior reveals that average attention stability is around 45% even as usage time increases; users tend to favour content from followed creators over those recommended by the platform.

The findings suggest that short-form video marketing is most effective when it emphasizes authenticity, aligns with Gen Z's values, includes creative storytelling, and avoids overly polished or overtly promotional styles. Implications for marketers include optimizing content strategies for short-form platforms, emphasizing trust and creator relatability, and mindful use of recommendation systems.

Keywords: Generation Z, Short-Form Video, Influencer Relatability, Authenticity, Brand Recall, Purchase Intention

Introduction

Generation Z (born approximately between 1997 and 2012) represents the first true cohort of digital natives, having grown up with technology and social media as an integral part of their daily lives (Prensky, 2001). Their digital behavior is characterized by quick access to information, a preference for visual and interactive content, and high familiarity with mobile devices and social networking platforms (Turner, 2015).

In recent years, platforms centered around short-form video content, such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, have gained immense popularity, especially among younger audiences. This form of content, characterized by brief duration and intense audiovisual expression, offers marketers a new opportunity to communicate directly and creatively with their target groups (Smith & Anderson, 2022).

Although the significance of social media and influencer marketing has been extensively studied, how Generation Z specifically responds to short-form videos as a marketing medium remains an area with notable research gaps. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring Gen Z's behaviors, preferences, and perceptions toward this type of content. Furthermore, it examines how factors such as authenticity, entertainment, and trust influence engagement and purchase intentions.

Understanding these elements is crucial for marketers seeking to effectively leverage short-form video platforms and create content that not only attracts but also sustains Gen Z's interest, enhancing brand interaction and loyalty.

Literature Review

The exponential growth of digital technologies has revolutionized marketing communication, particularly through the proliferation of social media platforms. Generation Z, defined as individuals born roughly between 1997 and 2012, stands out as the first cohort of true digital natives having been immersed in a digital environment since birth (Williams et al., 2018). Their consumption patterns and communication preferences are distinct from those of preceding generations, characterized by an affinity for mobile-first, highly visual, and interactive content (Anderson & Jiang, 2020).

Short-form video content, typically spanning from 15 to 60 seconds, has rapidly emerged as a dominant and highly effective format for capturing the attention of younger audiences. Unlike traditional long-form videos, short-form videos prioritize brevity, creativity, and authenticity, enabling brands to convey compelling narratives within limited timeframes (Johnson, 2021). This format aligns closely with Generation Z's reduced attention spans and preference for quick, engaging content, facilitating higher levels of engagement (Kaur & Singh, 2022).

Central to the ecosystem of short-form video marketing is influencer marketing, wherein content creators act as trusted voices, bridging the gap between brands and consumers. Influencers who demonstrate authenticity, relatability, and social consciousness resonate strongly with Generation Z, who values transparency and individuality (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). Research consistently shows that perceived influencer authenticity positively influences brand trust, engagement, and purchase intentions among younger consumers (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Additionally, the personalized algorithmic recommendation systems deployed by platforms like TikTok tailor content feeds to individual user preferences, dramatically amplifying content reach and viewer engagement (Zhang et al., 2023). However, these systems also pose challenges, including potential content fatigue and diminishing attention spans over time, highlighting the necessity for marketers to innovate continually and maintain content freshness (Kim & Park, 2022).

Despite the growing body of research on social media marketing, there remains a paucity of empirical studies specifically addressing how Generation Z engages with short-form video content within marketing contexts. This study aims to address this gap by employing a mixed-methods approach to offer nuanced insights into the communication strategies that effectively resonate with digital natives in the short-form video landscape.

Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of Generation Z's engagement with short-form video content in marketing communication. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods allows for triangulation of data and a richer analysis of both measurable behavioral patterns and the contextual nuances influencing those behaviors (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Research Design

The study is structured in two sequential phases:

Quantitative Phase: A cross-sectional survey targeting a representative sample of Generation Z consumers.

Qualitative Phase: A thematic content analysis of highly engaging short-form marketing videos on leading social media platforms.

Quantitative Phase

Sample and Data Collection

A purposive convenience sample of $N = 300$ participants, aged between 18 and 24 years, was recruited through digital channels such as Instagram, TikTok, and university mailing lists. This age range was selected to capture the core segment of Generation Z that actively engages with short-form video content (Dimock, 2019). Ethical approval was obtained, and informed consent was secured prior to data collection.

Research Objectives and Questions

The study aims to address the following key research questions:

RQ1: How frequently does Generation Z consume short-form video content on social media platforms?

RQ2: What are Generation Z's perceptions of authenticity and entertainment value in branded short-form videos?

RQ3: How do influencer relatability and trust affect engagement behaviors such as liking, sharing, and commenting?

RQ4: To what extent do these factors (authenticity, entertainment, influencer relatability, trust) influence Generation Z's purchase intentions?

RQ5: What narrative and promotional strategies characterize the most engaging short-form marketing videos targeting Generation Z?

Instrumentation

The survey instrument was developed based on validated scales from prior studies on digital marketing and influencer engagement (e.g., Lou & Yuan, 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017). It comprised the following key constructs:

Short-form video consumption frequency: Measured via self-reported average daily time spent on platforms featuring short-form video content (RQ1)

Perceived authenticity: Adapted from the Authenticity Scale (Gilmore & Pine, 2007), assessing respondents' perceptions of genuineness in branded videos (RQ2).

Entertainment value: Assessed by respondents' ratings of the enjoyment and engagement elicited by short videos (RQ2).

Influencer relatability: Measured using items assessing emotional connection and perceived similarity with influencers (RQ3).

Trust: Evaluated through items measuring confidence in the credibility of the video content and influencers (RQ3).

Engagement behaviors: Frequency of likes, shares, comments, and saves (RQ4).

Purchase intention: Likelihood of purchasing products featured in the short-form videos (RQ4).

All items used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire underwent pilot testing with 30 participants to ensure reliability and validity, yielding Cronbach's alpha values above 0.80 for all constructs.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed with SPSS 28.0 and AMOS 27.0. Descriptive statistics addressed RQ1. Correlation and regression analyses examined relationships among variables relevant to RQ2–RQ4. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) tested the overall hypothesized influence model.

Qualitative Phase

Data Collection

A purposive sample of $n = 60$ viral short-form marketing videos from TikTok and Instagram Reels was selected based on high engagement and product relevance (fashion, beauty, technology). The goal was to address RQ5 by uncovering dominant themes and strategies.

Analytical Procedure

Using inductive thematic content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), two independent coders identified recurring patterns relating to authenticity, storytelling, influencer traits, and promotional tactics. Inter-coder reliability was high (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.87$).

Findings

This section presents the results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses, structured around the research questions outlined in the methodology.

Quantitative Findings

RQ1: Frequency of Short-Form Video Consumption

Descriptive statistics revealed that the majority of respondents engage with short-form video content daily. Specifically, 68% of participants reported watching short videos for more than 1 hour per day, while 22% spent between 30 minutes and 1 hour. Only 10% reported less frequent engagement (less than 30 minutes daily). This confirms the high penetration of short-form video platforms among Generation Z users.

RQ2: Perceptions of Authenticity and Entertainment Value

Participants rated the perceived authenticity of branded short-form videos relatively high ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.58$), indicating that content that appears genuine and relatable resonates well with this cohort. Entertainment value also received a strong positive evaluation ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.52$), highlighting the importance of enjoyable and engaging storytelling in capturing Gen Z's attention.

RQ3: Influencer Relatability, Trust, and Engagement Behaviors

Correlation analysis showed significant positive relationships between influencer relatability and trust ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$), as well as between trust and engagement behaviors ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$). Engagement behaviors—measured as likes, shares, comments, and saves—were positively correlated with both authenticity ($r = 0.57$, $p < 0.001$) and entertainment value ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that influencers perceived as relatable and trustworthy foster higher levels of audience interaction.

RQ4: Predictors of Purchase Intention

Hierarchical regression analyses indicated that authenticity ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), entertainment value ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$), influencer relatability ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$), and trust ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$) were significant positive predictors of purchase intention, explaining 62% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.62$, $F(4,295) = 122.45$, $p < 0.001$). Trust emerged as the strongest predictor, underscoring its critical role in conversion from engagement to actual purchase decisions.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) confirmed the hypothesized model fit: $\chi^2(85) = 108.43$, $p = 0.07$; CFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.03. The model supported direct and indirect effects of authenticity, entertainment, and influencer relatability on purchase intention mediated by trust and engagement.

Qualitative Findings (RQ5)

The thematic content analysis of 60 viral short-form marketing videos identified four dominant themes:

Authenticity through Informality: Successful videos frequently employed informal, behind-the-scenes footage or spontaneous content, creating a sense of genuineness. Many featured influencers speaking candidly about their experiences with the product rather than scripted advertisements.

Engaging Storytelling: Narratives were often short but compelling, using humor, surprise elements, or relatable scenarios to maintain viewer interest. Story arcs usually culminated in a clear call-to-action, encouraging immediate response.

Relatable Influencers: Videos featured influencers who displayed traits resonant with Gen Z values diversity, social awareness, and individuality. Micro-influencers, in particular, were noted for fostering stronger personal connections with their audiences.

Interactive Promotional Tactics: Techniques such as challenges, user-generated content invitations, discount codes, and direct product demonstrations increased viewer participation and sharing.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study sought to explore how Generation Z engages with short-form video content within the context of marketing communication, with particular attention to perceived authenticity, entertainment value, influencer relatability, and trust. By employing a mixed-methods approach, the research provides both breadth and depth in understanding the factors that drive engagement and purchase intentions among digital natives.

Interpretation of Key Findings

The findings confirm that short-form video content has become a dominant medium of digital engagement for Generation Z, a cohort uniquely attuned to brevity, interactivity, and mobile-first experiences. Consistent with prior studies (Johnson, 2021; Kaur & Singh, 2022), participants reported frequent and habitual consumption of such content, reinforcing the need for marketers to prioritize this format in strategic planning.

The high ratings for authenticity and entertainment value reflect Generation Z's skepticism toward overt commercialism and preference for content that feels genuine, relatable, and emotionally resonant. This aligns with Gilmore and Pine's (2007) assertion that authenticity is a key currency in modern consumer culture. Moreover, as indicated by Lou and Yuan (2019), authenticity and perceived transparency are directly linked to trust — a relationship strongly supported by the present study's regression and SEM results.

Importantly, the influence of trust as a mediating factor between content perception and purchase intention cannot be overstated. Trust not only enhanced engagement behaviors (likes, shares, and comments) but also emerged as the most significant predictor of consumers' willingness to act on marketing messages. These findings validate prior models (e.g., De Veirman et al., 2017) and expand them by situating them in the specific context of algorithm-driven short-form platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels.

The qualitative content analysis revealed that the most engaging videos consistently employed informal, conversational tones, often leveraging humor, vulnerability, or behind-the-scenes narratives to establish rapport. Influencers who deviated from heavily scripted promotional language and instead shared personal experiences or product demonstrations cultivated higher perceived authenticity — a finding that supports the emerging literature on parasocial interaction in digital marketing (Abidin, 2016).

Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital marketing and generational media consumption by empirically validating the role of short-form video content as both a communication vehicle and a behavioral trigger. It further refines our understanding of how psychological constructs such as trust and relatability mediate the effectiveness of influencer-driven messaging.

Moreover, the findings reinforce the notion that consumer-brand relationships in Gen Z are largely affective and identity-based, rather than transactional (Williams et al., 2018). This necessitates a shift away from traditional, rational appeals toward more emotionally intelligent, socially aware, and participatory content strategies.

Managerial Implications

For practitioners, the implications are both strategic and operational. Marketing professionals seeking to engage Gen Z should:

Prioritize authentic, unscripted content over polished, overtly promotional material.

Collaborate with micro- and nano-influencers, who often offer higher relatability and trustworthiness compared to macro-influencers.

Integrate entertainment-driven narratives that align with platform-specific culture and humor norms.

Leverage interactive elements such as challenges, polls, and user-generated content to foster community engagement.

Monitor algorithmic trends to ensure that content remains visible and timely, while avoiding overexposure that may lead to content fatigue (Kim & Park, 2022).

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The sample was geographically limited and may not fully capture cross-cultural differences in Gen Z media consumption. Future research could adopt a cross-national comparative design to explore cultural variability in short-form video engagement.

Additionally, the current study focused on user perceptions and self-reported behaviors. Future studies could incorporate behavioral analytics data from platforms (e.g., watch time, click-through rates) or longitudinal designs to assess the evolution of engagement over time.

Moreover, as platforms evolve rapidly, future investigations should examine emerging technologies such as augmented reality filters, AI-generated influencers, and live-stream commerce as new forms of short-form content that may further influence marketing dynamics.

Conclusion

In an attention economy dominated by visual immediacy and algorithmic curation, short-form video content represents a critical touchpoint for engaging Generation Z. This study underscores the importance of authenticity, trust, and emotional relatability in fostering meaningful digital engagement and driving consumer action. As this generation continues to mature into dominant economic actors, marketers must evolve their strategies accordingly, crafting content that does more than sell — it must connect, entertain, and earn trust in a fragmented and highly competitive media landscape.

References

1. Abidin, C. (2016). Visibility labour: Engaging with influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. *Media International Australia*, 161(1), 86–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X16665177>
2. Anderson, M., & Jiang, J. (2020). *Teens, social media & technology 2020*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/>