

# **Marketing to Digital Natives: How Generation Z is Transforming Brand Communication**

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## **Abstract**

This master's thesis explores how Generation Z is transforming brand communication in today's increasingly digital environments. As the first generation that grew up entirely in digital technologies, Generation Z demonstrates different characteristics from the previous generations, considering their media consumption habits, trust formation processes and value expectations. These characteristics of this digitally native cohort challenge traditional marketing understanding of brands. This research aims to understand how these characteristics of Generation Z impact marketing strategies and how marketing professionals interpret and respond to this shift in their brand practices.

This research adopts an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative approach. Research data were collected through semi-structured expert interviews with marketing professionals working across various industries, including fintech, fashion retail, banking, mobile advertising, and food delivery platforms. The expert interview data were examined through thematic analysis. This allowed the organic development of patterns and insights from professional experiences. Instead of developing from predefined models.

The findings suggest that short video content, authenticity, and transparency are crucial elements for effectively engaging with Generation Z. Moreover, it is suggested that the main reasons for the transformation in future of marketing are platform hierarchies and technological developments such as artificial intelligence. Early signals related to Generation Alpha further suggest an intensification of these trends.

Overall, this research contributes to academic literature by combining perspectives of marketing professionals from diverse backgrounds. Also provides practical tips for brands which aim to engage with Gen Z.

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# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

## **1.1 Background of the Research**

Recent technological developments fundamentally changed the way of information consumption and the communication between humans and the interaction between brands (McKinsey & Company, 2018). As being the first generation that grew into this digitalized world, Generation Z is identified as the most disruptive cohort across all age groups (Dimock, 2019). Gen Z is described as who was born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s (Dimock, 2019). They interact daily through social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat. These interactions created new norms for content consumption, especially on attention span, trust formation and value alignment.

Furthermore, the brand communication is significantly impacted by this shift. For instance, the traditional top-down marketing strategies, such as polished images, celebrity endorsements and one-sided messaging, do not function on Gen Z. Rather than that Gen Z prefers authentic narratives, peer recommendations, participative and short-format content. These expectations of Gen Z are shaped in digitalized environment in which information is abundant, verifiable and socially contextualized. As well as where digital platforms are constantly changing to optimize user engagement. As a result, brands are forced to reconsider not just how they communicate but also how they establish credibility.

Simultaneously, technological developments like the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), hyper-personalization and automation in the content fasten changes in the marketing practices. In this environment, consumers are also increasing using AI tools. The areas that consumers benefit from these tools are for information search, product comparison and content creation. Brands also benefit from these tools for example for target optimization or predicting consumer behaviors or personalizing their narratives. In addition, these technological developments are also influenced the upcoming generations of Gen Z. The entrance of new generations to the market signals bigger changes for the future of marketing, which the brands need to foresee (Francis and Hoefel, 2018; Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2021).

Considering these events, it is significant for both academia and the business world to understand expectations and behavioral patterns of Gen Z. Despite that, the existing studies in academia are largely focused on the consumer perspectives of Gen Z, rather than analyzing how

marketing professionals interpret and respond to this generational shift led by Gen Z. In this research, this gap is addressed by examining how marketing experts across different industries, including fintech, fashion retail, banking, food delivery, and mobile advertising, understand Gen Z and how the insights from these marketing experts enlighten the evolution of marketing strategies.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

The main research problem of this research roots from the limited fragmentation of the existing academia. Although, the digital behaviors of this cohort have been studied, there is still room for understanding how the expectations of Gen Z transform the marketing strategies of brands on different platforms. In existing literature, terminologies like "influencer marketing" or "short-form content" can be examined. However, existing literature lacks in delivering an integrated understanding of how these terminologies influence the strategic decision-making processes of brands. In addition, existing research is based on consumer surveys. This limits the examination of how marketing professionals adapt to real-world business practices. Moreover, the latest developments in AI and the emergence of the upcoming cohorts paved the way for new dynamics that are not yet well captured in academia. The insufficiency in the literature on how brands should prepare for the future that is shaped by these developments is another reason of this research. To summarize, this research aims to fill these gaps by analyzing how marketing experts interpret the impact of Gen Z on brand communication and how they forecast future developments.

## **1.3 Research Aim**

The aim of this research is to examine how Generation Z transforms contemporary brand communication and to explore how emerging technologies and the rise of Generation Alpha are likely to transform future marketing strategies.

## **1.4 Research Questions**

The following research questions serve as the foundation for this research, which arises from the gaps found in the academic literature:

RQ1. How does Generation Z impact the marketing strategies that brands create and implement?

RQ2. How do Generation Z's expectations on authenticity, transparency and value alignment influence their view on brand communication?

RQ3. How will the emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and the rise of Generation Alpha shape the future of marketing?

## **1.5 Rationale and Significance of the Research**

The main rationale of this research is based on the growing economic and cultural importance of Generation Z and the adaptation challenges that brands face in marketing. Gen Z is different than the previous generations as they have digital literacy at the advanced level, instant platform switches and high awareness of ethical issues, which are making consistent and effective brand communication strategies complicated (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021; Jayatissa, 2020).

Research shows that this cohort has strong expectations for authenticity, transparency, and value alignment topics, specifically in the scopes of sustainability and social responsibility (Morhart et al., 2015; Francis and Hoefel, 2018). If Gen Z perceive inconsistency in the narratives and the actual practices of brands, then they quickly disengage with them, and it can also cause damage to brand reputation. Therefore, brands struggle with maintaining credibility and trust in fragmented digital environments (Morhart et al., 2015; Schultz and Peltier, 2013; Jayatissa, 2020). The existing literature largely focuses on consumer behavior of Gen Z through survey-based examinations. Moreover, the insight into how marketing professionals interpret Gen Z's expectations and how they translate them into strategies of their brands across industries is limited. Therefore, this gap is relevant specifically as marketing strategies are shaped not only with consumer behaviors but also with managerial interpretations and the limitations of the brands.

Another rationale is the significance of recent technological advancements like artificial AI, targeting through algorithms, and data-driven personalization. This digitally native cohort actively uses AI tools to search and evaluate information, while brands also utilize similar technologies to optimize communication and engagement (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2021). Another crucial point is the upcoming generations. For example, Generation Alpha signals that in the future there is a need for more adaptive marketing strategies. As brands are increasingly required to respond to rapidly evolving generational expectations and digital behaviors (Francis and Hoefel, 2018; Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2021).

From an academic perspective, this research contributes to existing marketing and brand communication literature by integrating expert insights. From a practical perspective, this research serves as a guide for brands, seeking to make transparent and adaptive marketing strategies for engaging with Gen Z.

## 1.6 Scope of the Research

This research focuses on Generation Z's impact on brands' digital brand communication. The focus is on topics like short-form content, authenticity, peer validation, user-generated content, and AI-rooted personalization practices in marketing. Moreover, this research examines the expert insights from various regions, including the markets of DACH, Benelux, the Nordics, and Turkey, which enables a cross-regional reflection while maintaining focus on generational patterns.

This research does not evaluate offline marketing strategies, nor does it attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of all social media platforms. Instead, it concentrates on those most relevant to Gen Z. That's why TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and emerging AI-based tools are the focus points of this research to ensure depth and relevance.

## 1.7 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis consists of five main chapters, each of them builds on the previous one to provide a coherent analysis of Generation Z's influence on contemporary brand communication.

- **Chapter 1: Introduction** outlines the research background, problem statement, aims, research questions and the rationale of this research.
- **Chapter 2: Literature Review** analyses key theoretical and empirical studies on Generation Z, digital consumer behavior and contemporary brand communication.
- **Chapter 3: Methodology** explains the research design, interpretivist paradigm, data collection through expert interviews and the thematic analysis procedure.
- **Chapter 4: Findings** shows the empirical results of expert interviews which are structured around six emergent.
- **Chapter 5: Conclusion** summarizes the findings, answers the research questions and discusses implications and directions for future research.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## 2.1 Introduction of Literature Review

Since Gen Z grew up with social media, smartphones and the internet, they described as digital natives (Prensky, 2001). They have been exposed to the digital world all through their lives. Their consumption of information and decision-making processes are also transformed by this exposure. As a result, traditional methods of marketing cannot attract this cohort. Moreover, in this environment, brands need to understand and fulfill expectations of Gen Z for their long-term success. The mentioned Gen Z expectations include participation, authenticity and value alignment in actual marketing practices of brands.

Three core frameworks in the literature are relevant to this research. First, studies on digital consumer behavior examine how Gen Z engages with brands through social media, user-generated content, peer influence and influencer marketing (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021). According to these studies, Gen Z is more inclined to trust individuals than brands and social proof play an essential role in shaping consumer choices (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021).

Secondly, to explain how Gen Z behaviors shape brand narratives, this chapter draws on brand equity and communication perspectives in digital marketing (Keller, 2016). According to Keller, brand equity is the set of associations, emotions and knowledge which are stored in the minds of consumers (2016). In the digital world, these associations are formed through campaigns and daily interactions, reviews and content creation. Therefore, the framework of brand equity is essential to connect the digital habits of Gen Z to changes in how brand value is created and continued (Keller, 2016).

The third framework is focused on how brands coordinate their messages across platforms so that they build a coherent brand experience, through literature on integrated marketing communications (IMC) (Schultz and Peltier, 2013). For the Gen Z audience, IMC is a crucial framework, as today the communication unfolds through different platforms like TikTok or Instagram. Moreover, besides the current platforms, the emerging platforms are also vital to understand this fragmented reality. As argued by Schultz and Peltier that integration is no longer an option, but it is a necessity to avoid contradictory brand narratives and fatigue of messaging in an attention-scarce environment (2013).

These three frameworks describe the need for brands to not only observe the Gen Z values but take actions to adapt and transform accordingly to these values. Brands are expected to accept

the role of Gen Z as they are active collaborators and adapt their narratives in a more transparent and participatory language, rather than imposing static and one-sided narratives. Moreover, Gen Z expect brands to transform their practices into real responsibilities including social, environmental and ethical concerns.

Therefore, this chapter reviews (a) the defining characteristics of Generation Z, (b) their digital consumer behavior and media usage and (c) the evolution of brand communication strategies targeting this cohort. By integrating established marketing frameworks (Keller, 2016; Schultz and Peltier, 2013) with recent research on digital natives (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021; Jayatissa, 2020), this chapter identifies key literature gaps, particularly the limitations of cross-country, managerial perspectives on how Gen Z insights are translated into marketing practices. These gaps guide the empirical design of this research.

## **2.2 Generation Z and Digital Consumer Behavior**

### **2.2.1 Generation Z: Definitions and Core Characteristics**

As the core subject of this research, Generation Z is generally defined as the first generation that grew up in a fully digital environment, who was born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s (Dimock, 2019). Gen Z is surrounded by social media, smartphones and digital connectivity constantly. Prensky identified this generation notably as digital natives which is defined as the individuals who have never experienced a world without the internet (2001). Different from the previous generations, Gen Z directly integrated digitalization into their habits and daily practices. Because they were born and raised in a digitalized world, their interactions, consumption behaviors and decision-making manners are affected by this digital era. This digitalization formed their values and expectations from brands. This resulted in a driving element for brands to transform their marketing strategies.

According to previous research by Jayatissa, Gen Z has different psychological, social and behavioral features from the previous generations (2020). Being self-sufficient, pragmatic and socially conscious are defined as the features of Gen Z, as well as preferring authenticity and transparency in relations with the brands (Jayatissa, 2020). Gen Z has polar values, on the one side, individuality and self-expression are indispensable for them; on the other side, inclusivity and collective awareness are also essential values for them. Because of this polarity of desire for both personal uniqueness and social belonging, marketing professionals find it challenging to understand and engage with them (Jayatissa, 2020). Consequently, values of Gen Z require

efforts for marketing professionals that are used to traditional marketing which is centered on the logic of mass communication, linear purchase funnels, and static identities of brands (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2021; Schultz and Peltier, 2013). To capture the attention of this cohort and to engage with them, marketing professionals must benefit from more dynamic and creative strategies which also consist of storytelling (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2021; Schultz and Peltier, 2013).

Authenticity and trust are other core elements that describe the behavior of Gen Z. Content on TikTok, including user reviews and peer recommendations, plays a crucial role in shaping the purchasing decisions of this cohort, highlighting the influence of user-generated content and social validation (Espejo et al., 2024; Djafarova and Bowes, 2021). Moreover, Gen Z tends to be skeptical over polished brand narratives. Instead, they favor transparent communication and socially responsible brand actions (Jayatissa, 2020). This shift indicates that authenticity has surpassed status or brand heritage when it comes to perceived transparency and authenticity, resulting in a non-negotiable value for the brands (Francis and Hoefel, 2018; Morhart et al., 2015).

Additionally, they are significantly influenced by social approval and online communities, with peer validation playing a central role in shaping purchasing decisions (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021; Jayatissa, 2020). Personalized and interactive experiences with brands are valued by Generation Z (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2021; Francis and Hoefel, 2018). In addition, while making purchase decisions, Gen Z consumers consider brands' actions regarding their expectations on social and environmental issues, and they prefer brands that take a position on sustainable and ethical concerns (Jayatissa, 2020; Francis and Hoefel, 2018).

Another characteristic of this generation is their strong social orientation that involves collaboration, interaction and preference for participatory involvement over passive consumption (Jayatissa, 2020). Additionally, this cohort actively shapes and experiences the world through social media platforms. For this generation, these platforms go beyond just being information landscapes but dynamic spaces that provide them with limitless opportunities to build their identities and express their individualities to interact and represent themselves (Prensky, 2001; Jayatissa, 2020). Additionally, Dimock (2019) highlighted that this social orientation occurs generally through online platforms, in which the engagement lines between the private and public identities are eroded.

Generation Z differs in terms of expectations and media consumption patterns from previous generations, including Millennials, who were born approximately between 1981 and 1996, while Millennials adapted to digital technologies over time, Generation Z grew up in a fully digital environment, resulting in differences between them (Dimock, 2019; Prensky, 2001). Generation Z has less patience for slow processes, has higher skepticism for brands, and has a higher ability to multitask across different media platforms and technological devices than previous generations (Prensky, 2001; Francis and Hoefel, 2018). The technology dependence, especially through smartphones and social media, resulted in the digital immediacy, which compels brands to continuously be relevant with consumers through engaging and experience-based communication practices (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2021).

Generation Z is internationally connected and socially concerned. Since they have been exposed to diverse cultures and digital communities, this cohort expects to see actual examples of inclusivity, sustainability, and transparent business practices (Jayatissa, 2020). In response to increasing skepticism regarding business operations, marketing professionals change the role of consumers from passive recipients to active participants (Schultz and Peltier, 2013; Barger, Peltier and Schultz, 2016).

The immediacy, co-creation, and connection in brand relationships describe this digital-native generation, which has revolutionized consumer culture (Prensky, 2001; Kotler, Kartajaya, and Setiawan, 2021). Understanding Generation Z requires admitting a technologically driven perspective based on shared values. And this will serve as the foundation for comprehending their digital behavior in the next section.

## **2.2.2 Gen Z as Digital Consumers**

Consumer behavior has changed because of digital transformation. Especially Generation Z has been affected by this transition. Contrastingly to the previous generations which are positioned mainly as passive recipients, Gen Z are active participants that constantly consume, create and shape content across platforms like TikTok, Instagram and YouTube (Daradkeh, Borges Gouveia and Sen, 2018). The trust of Gen Z strongly depends on authenticity and peer endorsement, which elevates the roles of influencer marketing and user-generated content (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021). Another characteristic of this cohort is that their trust is fragile. Research shows that any content that feels overly commercial to them can be a reason for this cohort to become disinterested quickly, indicating their strong emphasize on authenticity and

value consistency (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021). As they are committed to their values, marketing professionals are pushed to find a harmony between making promotions and being transparent and responsible in their communication practices (Morhart et al., 2015).

For the consumption habits of Generation Z, they are highly data-driven yet value-oriented as they favor personalized experiences, at the same time, they demand their privacy and control over their data (Matušić, Dadić and Grgić, 2024). The social movements and global events have impact on this cohort. Thus, they choose brands which respond and take steps for ethical and environmental issues, which is an indicator of their hybrid purchasing behavior of a combination between individual expression with social consciousness (Francis and Hoefel, 2018; Jayatissa, 2020).

This cohort is distinguished by their digital immediacy, which is a continuous expectation of fast replies, seamless interactions, and ongoing engagement (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2021). Their overexposure to information resulted in the development of their cognitive filtering abilities, which enable them to disregard content that is excessively promotional or irrelevant (Prensky, 2001). For that reason, brands need to involve interaction, storytelling and visual creativity in their marketing strategies to engage with this cohort efficiently.

Lastly, this cohort function as active content creators and opinion leaders. The power of micro-influencer Generation Z is increasing every day, as a result, the marketing power moved from brands to individuals which makes it a more participatory landscape (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021; Xu, 2023). Through online reviews, recommendations and UGC they are directly influencing the brand's reputation, both in positive and negative ways (Espejo et al., 2024). The consumption decisions of this cohort is influenced by their peers, which resulted in an evolution for marketing to interactive co-creation process in which brands and consumers work together to produce value and a narrative (Barger, Peltier and Schultz, 2016; Schultz and Peltier, 2013).

### **2.3 Brand Communication in the Digital Age**

A significant development in contemporary business is the evolution of marketing communication driven the digital age. This is a shift from one-sided traditional marketing to a more interactive marketing that involves consumers, and a data-driven multichannel system in which brands and consumers can challenge established narratives and shape one another (Schultz and Peltier, 2013).

This development pushed brands to adapt the Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) framework. This framework is more dynamic and consumer-oriented, and its core element lies in brand equity, which is the knowledge, associations, and emotional connections that consumers hold in their minds (Keller, 2016). In the digital era, brand associations are created by both brand narratives and consumer experiences and interactions (Keller, 2016; Barger, Peltier and Schultz, 2016). Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok evolved beyond social media platforms to vital ecosystems where brands and consumers interact continuously (Schultz and Peltier, 2013; Daradkeh, Borges Gouveia and Sen, 2018). Therefore, audiences increasingly participate in shaping brand narratives, reducing the level of control traditionally held by marketing professionals and increasing the need for authenticity and consistency across communication channels (Batra and Keller, 2016; Morhart et al., 2015).

The core value of social media lies in its ability to establish an emotional and immediate connections between consumers and brands (Chaubey, Husain and Ghufran, 2016; Barger, Peltier and Schultz, 2016). Social media platforms function not only as promotional tools but also as environments where brands can build communities and humanize their communication through continuous interaction (Chaubey, Husain and Ghufran, 2016; Morhart et al., 2015). Through digital platforms, brands can engage with consumers in real time, which increases perceived closeness and allows brands to be associated with more human-like traits, ultimately fostering emotional bonds with audiences (Barger, Peltier and Schultz, 2016). Yet, for brands, there is a growing risk in maintaining a consistent brand narrative across multiple digital channels and diverse audiences create challenges for marketing professionals. The complex nature of brand management on digital platforms is a crucial point for marketing professionals to take into consideration. The integrated marketing communications have shifted from a strategic choice to into a necessity to ensure clarity and brand cohesion (Batra and Keller, 2016).

Brand communication increasingly relies on short-form and interactive formats rather than traditional ones. For Generation Z, storytelling is embedded in platform-specific content such as short videos and live interactions, which enable brands to convey values and identity while sustaining engagement across fragmented digital touchpoints (Keller, 2016; Li and Kannan, 2014).

With the usage of digital tools, today marketing professionals can measure the engagement on different platforms, follow consumer journeys and link sales to specific channels or interactions. Even though the quantitative information provides valuable insights, marketing professionals

also need to utilize the qualitative information of brand positioning and consumer bonds. For that reason, they need to balance data-driven accuracy with creativity and human understanding.

Digital brand communication creates both opportunities and challenges, particularly regarding content overload and authenticity. Generation Z is highly capable of filtering out irrelevant or overly commercial messages, which contributes to attention fatigue and reduces the effectiveness of traditional advertising (Prensky, 2001; Buñag, 2024). To remain effective, brands must prioritize transparent and authentic communication that integrates technological tools with human-centered interaction (Schultz and Peltier, 2013).

To summarize, contemporary brand communication is described by interaction, immediacy and integration with increasingly blurred borders between marketers and consumers. For Generation Z, a participatory approach that fosters authenticity, shared values, and active engagement has become essential for success in marketing.

The following section examines how brands should strategically adapt to this transformation with the goal of effectively engaging and targeting customers of this cohort.

## **2.4 Marketing Strategies for Generation Z**

Generation Z requires a new understanding of marketing which extends solely segmentation based on demographics. It is argued that when cohort-specific communication patterns and motivations are captured, generational segmentation is considered to have relevance (Williams & Page, 2011).

Francis and Hoefel's (2018) *True Gen* framework describes four core traits shaping Generation Z marketing strategies: individual expression, ethical awareness, dialogue orientation and pragmatism. Strategically, these traits require brands to offer personalized value propositions, maintain credible and purpose-driven positioning, and sustain continuous interaction across digital touchpoints.

From a tactical perspective, effective engagement with Generation Z relies on short-form video formats such as TikTok, Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts, as well as collaborations with micro-influencers and the integration of UGC. These approaches support authenticity, peer validation and community connection, which are central to Gen Z's media consumption and trust formation (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021; Xu, 2023).

Furthermore, when the influencers develop the content brief together with the brands, it is the most effective partnership, the result is the same as well and the influencers disclose the sponsorships transparently to maintain credibility (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021; Xu, 2023). Moreover, micro-communities are the ecosystems which closer ties are established regarding the mass broadcasting channels. Brands can also benefit from micro-communities to maintain their engagement with Generation Z consumers to test their concepts, collect consumer feedback and strengthen the advocacy of users that often spend time in those platforms so that brands can benefit from the word-of-mouth marketing.

As a result, brands engaging with Generation Z increasingly move away from rigid, long-term campaign structures toward more flexible and adaptive marketing approaches. Rather than relying on single, large-scale campaigns, brands experiment with shorter content cycles, test messaging in real time and adjust communication based on audience response. This shift reflects a broader move toward integrated and continuous storytelling across platforms, where engagement indicators such as watch time, interaction and user-generated content become more relevant than traditional performance metrics (Keller, 2016; Schultz and Peltier, 2013).

Illustrative cases underline these patterns. In fashion, Nike leverages inclusive brand narratives and creator challenges to spark UGC at scale; in beauty, L'Oréal combines Artificial Reality (AR) try-on with diverse influencers to combine utility and representation (Francis and Hoefel, 2018; Xu, 2023). In the technology and lifestyle category, Apple's short-form creator stories privilege personal expression over specifications, aligning with generational identity logics (Williams and Page, 2011; Keller, 2016).

## **2.5 Brand Authenticity and Engagement**

The brand authenticity is defined as consumers' perception of a brand's integrity and its ability to deliver on its promises (Morhart et al., 2015). Generation Z evaluates the brand authenticity in narratives and actions of brands. Transparency on supply chain, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) and sustainability commitments are the examples that are perceived as authenticity practices from this cohort. To explain why authenticity is significant, self-presentation dynamics are useful. Gen Z displays identities on various platforms and looks to others for signs of authenticity (Santer, Manago and Bleisch, 2022). When brands utilize identity expression through personalization, consumers integrate with the brands through their narrative, resulting in a strong bond. This is an indicator of a shift in content from campaign centric to participatory

content like UGC contests and community challenges which boost co-creation by transforming passive viewers into contributor audiences (Barger, Peltier, and Schultz, 2016).

Purpose also coincides with authenticity. Jayatissa (2020) and Francis and Hoefel (2018) mentioned that Generation Z expects brands to demonstrate tangible and factual actions on social and environmental issues. As highlighted by Morhart et al. (2015), credible advocacy is achieved when brand purpose is coherently aligned with actual practices, shifting the focus of communication from claims to demonstrable actions, such as third-party certifications.

Engagement is depicted as a multi-dimensional element. It consists of the cognitive side covers the attention of consumers, the emotional side mentions the effect on consumers, and lastly the behavioral side which points to participation and advocacy of consumers for a brand. Social media channels allow live loops which are an environment for brands and consumers to exchange meanings continuously (Barger, Peltier, and Schultz, 2016).

Developing human-centered, platform-specific storytelling, working with creators who share the values of the brand and fostering open communication through interactive features like polls or live sessions are all effective engagement strategies for Generation Z. In conclusion, genuine engagement takes place when the brand's goals, products, and staff align.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Philosophy and Approach**

As This research adopts an interpretivist research paradigm, which seeks to understand individuals constantly interpret their experiences within specific cultural and organizational contexts as well as that the reality is socially constructed (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019). This paradigm is suitable since this research investigates how marketing experts understand Gen Z and adjust their brand communications strategies accordingly. Moreover, the interpretivism aspires to comprehend diverse managerial interpretations and subjective interpretations instead of universal laws.

According to Finlay (2002) and Berger (2015), reflexivity plays an essential role since knowledge in this paradigm is generated jointly by the researcher and participant. As an outcome, this research recognizes that insights originate through dialogue and interpretation instead of from objective observation.

Qualitative research was chosen to capture the depth and complexity of marketing professionals' reasoning. When investigating emerging concepts including authenticity, digital engagement, and influencer credibility, qualitative methods are particularly effective (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This research applies an inductive method which enables theoretical insights to arise from the data rather than testing predetermined hypotheses (Bryman, 2016). Finding new patterns and perspectives is made possible by inductive reasoning, because of the fact that Gen Z is a relatively new and evolving consumer group.

For the main method of data collection, semi-structured expert interviews were selected. This selection allows for the exploration of new ideas or examples while preserving consistent structure for expert interviews (Silverman, 2020). It aligns with the interpretivist paradigm. As it captures diverse, culturally embedded perspectives and understands how marketing professionals from different geographies and industries interpret Gen Z behavior.

### **3.2 Research Design**

This research analyzes how marketing experts perceive Gen Z changing marketing practices by utilizing a qualitative, exploratory research design. When the goal is learning about meanings, views, and experiences rather than quantifying specific things, qualitative methods are effective (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

The core method for gathering the data from the marketing professionals, the semi-structured expert interviews are utilized. In the expert interviews six open ended questions and 4 back up questions were asked to the experts. Furthermore, these expert interview questions were focused on the topics including the platform preferences of Gen Z, the value of authenticity, influencer impact and challenges that these experts face. Each of these expert interviews lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. These expert interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams. This enabled the participation of marketing professionals from Germany, Turkey and the Netherlands.

With utilizing from the remote expert interviews, accessibility and flexibility were ensured consistently during the interviews. The research design prioritized depth. Therefore, it encouraged expert interview participants to discuss sector-specific insights and examples in detail. Moreover, due to the research is inductive and interpretivist, this research does not aim for statistical generalisation but instead it seeks nuanced, contextfully rich accounts of professional practice. Additionally, the internationally mixed sample of experts supports the

understanding of how cultural and organisational environments shape the interpretations of marketing professionals on Gen Z.

### **3.3 Sampling and Participants**

For the strategy of expert sampling a purposive approach was selected to recruit participants with substantial professional experience in marketing, branding or digital communication (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016). For being eligible to be participate in the expert interviews minimum three years of professional experience in marketing or communication roles, as well as direct observations or strategic insights shaped by their interactions with Gen Z consumers are required.

On this purpose, seven marketing professionals were recruited through LinkedIn and the researcher's academic and professional network to participate in expert interviews. These participants represented a wide range of industries which ensured diversity in how Generation Z is perceived across different market contexts. In addition, these experts were drawn from sectors including banking, fintech, fashion retail, mobile app development and food delivery services. This variation in the industries that experts have experience in has enriched the dataset by providing perspectives from both corporate and digitally native companies. As a result, it enabled an extensive understanding of how Generation Z impacts contemporary marketing strategies. Moreover, the participants of the expert interviews were based in Germany, Turkey and the Netherlands. Additionally, the marketing responsibilities of participants extend across multiple regions, including DACH, the Benelux, the Nordics, Turkey and globe which provided valuable insights from cross cultures.

With benefiting from the purposive sampling, the researched accessed to individuals that capable of offering detailed and practice based insights. For qualitative thematic analysis, a sample size of seven experts is generally considered adequate because it usually allows for saturation, which indicates that no new conceptual themes emerge after this point (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019).

Furthermore, with usage of an information sheet which outlines the aims of the research, confidentiality measures and their right to withdraw from this research are informed the participants. After the information consent was obtained from the participants, the expert interviews were planned at times that worked for both parties.

### **3.4 Data Collection Procedure**

The research data was collected exclusively through semi-structured expert interviews. The expert interview questions including six main and four backup ones of this research are provided in Appendix A. In addition, the recruitment of the participants for expert interviews were occurred through personalised invitations sent through LinkedIn and email. After the participants gave the written consent for the interviews they joined the remote interviews conducted through Microsoft Teams.

In the beginning of each expert interview, the researcher restated the purpose of the research. Moreover, ethical rights were clarified and a permission to record solely audio was requested. During the interviews a core set of guiding questions which consists of six main and four back up ones were followed. While discussing the questions the flexibility for follow-up probing was also enabled. The Turkish participants of the research were interviewed in their mother language, Turkish, to maximise comfort and clarity. After the interviews were finished those transcripts translated into English to ensure consistency during analysis.

In addition, interviews were recorded for the purpose of transcription. Besides the transcription recording, field notes were also taken to capture tone, emphasis and contextual cues that might support the interpretation of expert interviews. Furthermore, all data which were obtained from the interviews were anonymised by removing names of the participants and identifiable details of their companies. Participants were assigned codes (e.g., P1–P7), and all digital files were stored securely on a password-protected laptop in accordance with GDPR standards.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

In this research, to analyse the data derived from the expert interviews a thematic analysis was conducted by following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach. As this method enables identification and interpretation of recurring patterns within interview data, it is suitable for this inductive qualitative research.

As the first step, the researcher familiarised herself with the data derived from the expert interviews. In details, reading the transcripts of the expert interviews multiple times helped the researcher to acquaint herself with the expert interview data. Early observations and key ideas about Gen Z's impact on marketing were recorded in the notes of the researcher. Moreover, in

the coding phase, including "authenticity," "short-form content," "platform roles," and "peer influence" were labelled to relevant text parts. Close interaction with the expert interview data was ensured through manual coding.

After that, codes were then grouped into larger candidate themes, such as authenticity and transparency, video-first consumption, micro-influencer trust, platform hierarchies and future digital trends. Themes were reviewed for coherence and distinctiveness and refined where necessary.

From that point, themes were clearly defined and named. Moreover, analytic summaries were developed to articulate their relevance to the research questions. A simple coding matrix was used to map theme frequency across participants and identify areas of convergence and divergence. This increased transparency and traceability in the analytic process.

In the final step, the themes synthesized into a comprehensive narrative presented in the Chapter of Findings and Conclusion. Additionally, direct quotations from the participants of the expert interviews were integrated to preserve authenticity and showcase specific interpretations from real life marketing practitioners. In summary, with benefiting from the thematic analysis transformation of individual expert views into a structured representation of how Generation Z shapes contemporary marketing is enabled.

### **3.6 Researcher Reflexivity**

As stated from Finlay that reflexivity is crucial in interpretivist research as the researcher actively shapes data collection and interpretation (2002). The researcher of this study is also a member of studied cohort, Generation Z. Therefore, the researcher has also her own insider understanding of digital culture, platform behaviours and social values. On the one hand, this facilitated the research but on the other hand it also posed risks such as of over-identification and biased interpretation.

This is why to mitigate these risks, the researcher engaged in introspective reflexivity (Finlay, 2002) through keeping a reflexive journal to document assumptions, emotional responses and interpretive decisions. In addition to that Berger's (2015) concept of researcher positioning was also utilized to emphasize the awareness of how personal identity and social background influence access, rapport and meaning-making.

To sum up, the researcher reached to interpretations through evidence transcripts. Moreover, repeated reading and the use of direct quotes from the participants of the expert interviews were also utilized. These approaches were done to ensure that insights truly reflected the perspectives of the participants' instead of generational standpoint of the the researcher. Reflexive practice helps in keeping analytical accuracy without losing sight of qualitative knowledge as co-constructed.

### **3.7 Trustworthiness**

Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability have been employed to determine the trustworthiness of this research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). First, the inclusion of illustrative direct quotations from these marketing professionals who participated in the expert interviews and the underlying the themes in a variety of participants strengthened the credibility element. Furthermore, dependability was addressed through detailed documentation of the research process. In addition, reflexive journaling, anonymized coding and a direct connection between interpretations and transcript data were contributed to confirmability. Detailed descriptions of the roles and industries and geographical contexts of the participants enabled transferability by allowing the readers to assess the applicability in other settings. These emerge from the interpretivist goal of transparent, contextually grounded, and carefully analytical qualitative findings.

### **3.8 Ethical Considerations**

This research followed the ethical guidelines of GISMA University of Applied Sciences. All participants of the expert interviews were provided with an information sheet. Furthermore at the beginning of each expert interviews, written informed consent forms were completed. Participation for the expert interviews was voluntary. And every participant maintained the right to withdraw at any stage of this research.

Moreover, identifiable information was removed and participant codes were assigned to protect confidentiality and anonymity of the participants and their organizations. Lastly, audio files will be stored on a secure location and deleted permanently after six months following the completion of the thesis. This research represented minimal ethical risk; however, participant comfort, privacy, and data security were foregrounded throughout.

## Chapter 4: Analysis and Findings

### 4.1 Introduction of Findings

Findings of this research are derived from the seven semi-structured expert interviews that were conducted with a diverse spectrum of marketing professionals across diverse industries and geographic regions. Throughout the analysis of these interviews, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework is implemented. Furthermore, an inductive data-driven coding process also took place during the examination. The core goal is to demonstrate how marketing experts interpret the behavioral patterns, expectations, and media habits of Generation Z. Through this process, the aimed goal is to understand how these factors impact contemporary marketing strategies.

The participants that were recruited in the expert interviews represented a wide geographical and professional diversity. The experts represented diverse industry backgrounds. Their work responsibilities cover DACH, Benelux, the Nordics, Turkey and global marketing domains. With this variation, this research is enabled to capture differences and similarities in platform preferences, consumer behavior, and communication expectations regarding Generation Z across markets.

The analysis generated six themes that consistently appeared across interviews:

1. Video-First & Short-Form Digital Consumption
2. Authenticity, Transparency, and Value-Driven Expectations
3. Peer Validation, User-Generated Content, and Micro-Influencers
4. Attention Scarcity and the Need for Instant, Clear Messaging
5. Platform Hierarchies and Gen Z's Media Ecosystem
6. Future Outlook: AI, Hyper-Personalization, Gamification, and Gen Alpha

Collectively, these themes answer the research questions by illustrating how marketing professionals comprehend the behavioral, technological, and cultural transformations triggered by Generation Z.

The findings presented in this chapter directly extend the theoretical frameworks that were established in the Literature Review chapter. In the second chapter, key elements like the digital nativity of Gen Z, authenticity, short attention spans, and the role of influencers are reviewed.

Through the expert interviews, a contribution was made through the insights from experts on their real-life business practices, specifically about how Gen Z's patterns are interpreted and applied to their marketing practices. Therefore, this chapter bridges conceptual understanding with practical marketing realities by showing how generational behaviors discussed in the Literature Review chapter actively shape strategic decision-making across industries for marketing experts.

#### **4.1.1 Researcher's Analytical Journey and Thematic Development**

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework in this research to develop thematically, the researcher started the analytic journey with reading the transcripts of the expert interviews repeatedly. These re-readings of the transcripts benefited the researcher by gaining familiarity with the data and identifying early patterns. Moreover, with benefiting from the taking notes concepts such as video-first consumption, authenticity expectations, and platform hierarchies in this initial stage.

After these stages, the researcher started coding. In the coding stage, relevant segments were highlighted and assigned labels including "short attention span," "peer validation," "TikTok as search engine," "insincerity sensitivity," and "AI-assisted decision-making." In detail, coding was carried out manually to maintain close engagement with the data. During this stage the reflexive notes were used by the researcher.

During coding, meaningful segments were highlighted and assigned analytical labels including "short attention span," "peer validation," and "TikTok as search engine.". Coding was carried manually to maintain close engagement with the data. Throughout the process, reflexive notes were used to ensure that themes remained based on participant statements and to monitor how the researcher's own Gen Z background might influence interpretation.

After the coding had progressed, related codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories. Moreover, these categories were repeatedly reviewed and refined to form coherent and distinctive themes. Following that, a coding matrix was developed to document how frequently each theme appeared across the seven interviews, which supported transparency and demonstration of the groundedness.

To support clarity during theme refinement, a color-coding system was applied to the thematic map:

- Theme 1 → Blue
- Theme 2 → Green
- Theme 3 → Purple
- Theme 4 → Orange
- Theme 5 → Yellow
- Theme 6 → Red

The repetitive and reflexive nature of this process ensured that the final themes represented the experts' perspectives in an authentic way while maintaining analytical validity.

#### 4.1.2 Quantification and Thematic Overview

The frequency of each theme across the seven expert interviews was documented with the goal of improving transparency. Although this research does not aim to generalize statistically, quantification clarifies the saturation and prominence of each theme. In detail, all seven interviews featured Themes 1, 3, 4, and 5. Theme 2 appeared in six interviews, and lastly, Theme 6 appeared in five interviews. This distribution strengthens the credibility of the thematic structure by depicting how strongly each theme is grounded in the expert accounts.

A color-coded overview of theme groundedness is presented in Table 1.

Theme	Color Code	Theme Title	Expert Coverage (n=7)
Theme 1	Blue	Video-First & Short-Form Digital Consumption	7/7 experts
Theme 2	Green	Authenticity, Transparency & Value Alignment	6/7 experts
Theme 3	Purple	Peer Validation, UGC & Micro-Influencers	7/7 experts

Theme 4	Orange	Attention Scarcity & Instant, Clear Messaging	7/7 experts
Theme 5	Yellow	Platform Hierarchies & Media Ecosystem	7/7 experts
Theme 6	Red	Outlook (AI, Hyper-Personalization, Gamification, Gen Alpha)	5/7 experts

Table 1. Theme Groundedness by Expert Frequency (Color-Coded Overview)

## 4.2 Theme 1: Video-First and Short-Form Digital Consumption

The first theme observed across all interviews was the shift toward video-first content. Specifically, TikTok is in the pioneer role. And then Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts followed. All seven marketing experts consistently described Generation Z as a visually driven cohort. Moreover, all participants highlighted that Gen Z prefers short and dynamic content. Along with being preferred, this content format has completely transformed how brands must communicate.

Several experts mentioned that TikTok has become the core social media platform to shape the consumer habits of this cohort. Expert A stated that "*TikTok is now the new Google*" she highlighted the significant role TikTok has for this cohort. Moreover, this highlights how the platform functions as more than being just a communication platform. Rather than that TikTok is now used as a search engine, recommendation hub and entertainment source for Gen Z all at once. Supporting to this statement from Expert A, recent industry research shows that 40% of Gen Z prefer searching on TikTok or Instagram instead of Google and that 50% of consumers aged 16–24 use social media to research brands rather than search engines (Found, 2025). These patterns indicate that TikTok is no longer just a communication platform, but it has become a central point that shapes the entire customer journey.

Furthermore, the short-form video content emerged as one of the strongest and most consistent patterns across all interviews. Participants repeatedly mentioned that Generation Z has reduced attention spans. Therefore, this short attention span fundamentally reshapes how brands must design and deliver their content to engage with Gen Z. In detail, experts noted that the attention of this cohort must be captured almost instantly, with the first few seconds of a video determining whether the message is received or ignored. One expert highlighted that their organization had shifted *“from text to video and from corporate language to something more authentic”* to ensure that complex financial messages remain digestible and engaging for younger audiences (Expert D). This statement illustrates that the shift towards video-first communication is not limited to entertainment-driven industries. But it is increasingly necessary in highly regulated and information-intensive sectors as well.

Short-form content is conquering the industry as being positioned as the standard for brands. As it is no longer just a complementary content format. Several participants noted that major social media platforms are redesigning their architectures around this short format: Instagram pushing Reels, YouTube introducing Shorts and even LinkedIn integrating vertical video scrolling. As Expert A argued, *“If short-form didn’t dominate, YouTube would not introduce Shorts, and even Twitter and LinkedIn would not add swipe features.”* Such observations from the marketing practitioners indicate that platform evolution is being driven directly by the preferences and consumer behaviors of Gen Z. An example from the original interview transcript and its English translation is provided in Appendix B.

Overall, the first theme demonstrated the consumption style of Gen Z, which is reshaping the entire digital ecosystem. Marketing professionals across industries from banking to food delivery to mobile apps are reorganizing their creative processes, campaign briefs and content pipelines around this transformation of rapid, snackable and high-impact video formats. Thus, short-form video has become essential for brands seeking to remain relevant within the attention economy of this cohort.

### **4.3 Theme 2: Authenticity, Transparency, and Value-Driven Expectations**

The second major theme that emerged from the expert interviews is the importance of authenticity, transparency and value alignment in shaping perspectives of Generation Z toward brands. Most experts agreed that this cohort holds higher expectations regarding ethical consistency, honesty and social responsibility than previous cohorts. This aligns with the True

Gen framework, which identifies authenticity, transparency and purpose-driven values as central drivers of Generation Z's consumption behavior (Francis and Hoefel, 2018).

A common insight across interviews is that Generation Z assesses brands not just based on how well the products perform, but also on how much the brands align with the values important for this cohort. In the interviews, experts explained that value-driven communication directly influences the brand trust and loyalty. As Expert A stated, "*Generation Z gives a lot of feedback to brands, and brands must improve themselves according to this feedback. Compared to previous generations, they can influence and change how brands position themselves. They can collectively decide to boycott a brand and when they do, they succeed.*" This shows a clear transformation for participatory and accountability-oriented consumer behavior.

Moreover, experts also noted that expectations of this cohort root from growing up in a fully digital environment. As Expert C described that they are "*very digital native and digital driven and always open to new platforms.*" This continuous connectivity improves their ability to assess brands.

The importance of authenticity over polished communication was repeatedly emphasized by the participants. As Expert D explained, "*Gen Z have much higher purpose expectations and they are more skeptical. Previous generations were impressed by glossy, high-production ads, but Gen Z is far more skeptical. They notice very quickly if something feels off or insincere. They trust content that feels authentic, even if it is just an iPhone recording by a real person*".

In detail, Gen Z has expectations for openness and visibility behind the decisions of the brands. Expert D explained that this cohort prefers brands that "*show the people, the processes and the reality behind the scenes,*" rather than polished corporate narratives. Experts across different sectors including fintech, fashion, mobile advertising and banking repeated this pattern by noting that highly polished content may appear less credible to Gen Z.

Moreover, expert B emphasized that Generation Z is especially sensitive to the ethical and social issues of the globe. Their purchasing decisions often depend on brands' authentic dedication to issues like sustainability gender equality and human rights. When brands ignore these concerns, "*they react very strongly.*" (Expert B). This observation aligns with McKinsey's report, which also highlights that consumption choices of Gen Z are shaped heavily by ethical concerns and that value alignment is often a requirement for credibility (2018).

Furthermore, the interviews also showed that this cohort is able to collectively influence the behaviors of brands. Experts described this in cases showing that young consumers organized online backlash or public criticism that forced brands to revise campaigns or explain decisions. As Expert B noted, this generation “*can affect the direction, growth and reputation of a brand*” which displays a level of collaboration that has not been seen in previous cohorts.

Another important insight is that authenticity must be demonstrated through actions rather than claimed through slogans. Communication that refers to values without real behavioral evidence quickly loses credibility. Expert C noted that Generation Z responds best when brands communicate “*with clarity, honesty and sincerity*” and that they disengage when messages from the brands feel disconnected from reality.

Throughout the interviews, experts linked authenticity to a shift towards more participatory communication. This generation wants to be involved in brand narratives. As Expert A said, “*brands are no longer the only storytellers, consumers and communities are now active creators.*” This perspective is reinforced by findings from AdTech Today (2025), which states that users and creators now shape brand narratives in ways that traditional top-down communication can no longer achieve.

Lastly, transparency is increasingly linked to expectations around data use, artificial intelligence and personalized communication. In detail, Gen Z understands how digital tracking works. Therefore, they expect brands to explain why certain messages are shown to them. As Expert D explained “*they need to understand why the content is shown to them and what is in it for them.*” This is a signal of a shift from ethical transparency toward a need for openness about algorithms and data-driven content.

To summarize, this theme shows how Generation Z's dedication to authenticity and transparency has changed the core principles of brand communication. As Gen Z can verify information instantly, expects ethical consistency, and has a collective effect on brand reputation, these elements make value-driven communication essential for brands. Finally, brands that aim to engage this generation must emphasize honest storytelling, true social responsibility, and transparency in all stages of communication.

#### 4.4 Theme 3: Peer Validation, User-Generated Content and Micro Influencers

In the third major theme identified across the interviews, the strong influence of peer validation, user-generated content and micro-influencers takes place in shaping brand perceptions of this cohort. In detail, experts consistently described Gen Z as a cohort that trusts people over institutions. They favor relatable, everyday creators instead of celebrities or polished campaigns. This marks a structural shift in how influence is produced and distributed in digital environments. Brands including the major ones are transforming with this shift in a more participatory position with content that is created together with Gen Z members. Expert A explained that “*Major brands now involve Gen Z directly in content creation, for instance, by letting them edit brand videos or launching challenges where content performance determines participation opportunities. These were tactics previously used only by small start-ups, but they have now become mainstream across global brands.*”

Experts widely agreed that micro-influencers play a central role in shaping Gen Z’s purchasing journeys. Expert A explained that younger audiences choose “*real, ordinary people whose recommendations feel genuine*” while Expert F stated that micro-influencers’ content “*feels closer to everyday life*” making it more persuasive. These observations reflect a broader trend in which authenticity and relatability outweigh follower count or production quality.

Moreover, the expert insights align with quantitative evidence from Li (2025), whose study of Gen Z consumers found that micro-influencers (10k–100k followers) account for 71.2% of influencer impact, outperforming macro- and mega-influencers. The study also showed that 82.4% of participants discover new products through influencer content, confirming that influencers serve as key entry points in early-stage brand awareness and product consideration (Li, 2025). Micro-influencers are significant in both qualitative and quantitative findings, indicating their strategic value in Gen Z marketing.

Another point is that peer validation also emerged as a defining characteristic of Gen Z’s decision-making behavior. Across interviews, experts described how Gen Z relies heavily on community input. For example, reviews and comment sections are the points that Gen Z take into consideration before purchasing. Expert C noted that this generation actively looks for “*signs that real people use the product*” highlighting the critical role of social proof in

establishing credibility. This behavior marks a difference from the previous generations who were more responsive to traditional top down messages led by the brands.

User generated content was also identified as a crucial sign for authenticity. Experts explained that even formal or highly regulated industries such as banking utilize UGC content to appear more transparent and humanly. Expert D observed that low production, like "*behind-the-scenes videos created by employees, often makes the brand feel more tangible and more authentic*" which is an indicator of the Gen Z preference for unfiltered communication. These observations show how UGC has expanded beyond the lifestyle and entertainment industries and reached broader industries.

In short, the findings indicate that Gen Z's trust is shaped by unstructured and peer-driven content. In detail, micro-influencers and everyday users play a foundational role in how this generation discovers products, evaluates credibility and take action to purchase. Therefore, brands need to maintain their relevance by prioritizing micro influencer partnerships, authentic UGC formats and amplifying social proof across marketing strategies.

#### **4.5 Theme 4: Attention Scarcity and the Need for Instant, Clear Messaging**

The fourth major theme is the challenge posed by the limited attention span of Gen Z and their constant exposure to digital stimuli. Across all interviews, experts noted that Gen Z functions in an attention-scarce environment. And this environment is shaped by fast content formats and a continuous flow of information. As a result, brands need to prioritize immediacy, clarity and high impact in their communication if they want to be noticed by this cohort.

One significant observation from the experts is that the first few seconds of any content are crucial for Gen Z. As Expert F explained "*if I post a 30-second video, Gen Z leaves in the first 10 seconds unless there is a trend or a strong hook* ". Another example from Expert A is that "*Gen Z's attention span is much lower, which makes it harder to grab them. Everyone is trying to capture their attention, but because their span is so short, attracting them into a campaign or towards a product becomes more difficult. There are simply too many distractions.*" Moreover, Expert C stated that "*The most important difference is that Gen Z has a very short attention span. Communication must be clear, direct and short. On many platforms we already see split-screen videos being used just to keep their attention, because the audience gets bored quickly. There is so much competing content online that it has become extremely hard for*

*brands to stand out.*” Therefore, Gen Z is described as an audience that quickly filters content based on relevance, emotional connection and visual appeal. Rather than waiting for a message to unfold, Gen Z decides almost instantly whether something is worth their time.

These observations are in line with recent discussions on the psychological impact of social media on attention. Buñag’s analysis of Gen Z media use shows that the constant stream of short, stimulating content on platforms such as TikTok, YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels contributes to fragmented attention and a tendency toward rapid task switching, making it harder to sustain focus on longer or more complex tasks (Buñag, 2024). This analysis supports the perception of experts that attention has become a scarce resource that brands must actively earn.

The experts also linked attention scarcity to specific expectations about content format and tone. Several participants stressed the importance of concise, visually rich communication that delivers the core message immediately. Expert C observed that Gen Z “*wants clarity straight away*” and responds better to messages that are direct, relatable and purified from the corporate language. Even sectors that traditionally rely on heavy texts and technical explanations like fintech and banking are reported to adapt their content into shorter formats that can be consumed quickly but still provide credibility.

A further insight relates to how platform design reinforces these behaviors. Experts described how scrolling mechanics, algorithmic feeds and short video formats like Instagram Reels train users to expect speed and instant stimulation. As Expert A mentioned “*Gen Z lives in a world of constant content flow; they are always scanning, comparing and moving on quickly.*” In this context, brands are not only competing with direct competitors. But they also compete with entertainment content, influencers and peer posts that are all optimized to capture the attention of Gen Z in seconds.

At the same time, several experts noted that while short-form content is essential for capturing attention, it is not always sufficient for building trust or supporting more complex decisions. In categories such as finance or technology, Gen Z often looks for additional information once their interest is triggered. As Expert D explained “*a short video might get their attention, but they still want enough information to make an educated decision.*” This suggests that effective communication for Gen Z requires a layered strategy: short, high-impact hooks at the beginning

of the journey, followed by clear and accessible deeper content for those who want to engage further.

In summary, this theme indicates that Gen Z's attention patterns have reshaped marketing. To remain relevant, brands need to design messages that are clear, fast and visually engaging. Consequently, to effectively deal with Gen Z's attention economy, communication must be formatted in a way that respects how this generation discovers, evaluates, and processes information in an increasingly crowded digital environment. This goes beyond simply creating shorter content.

#### **4.6 Theme 5: Platform Hierarchies and Gen Z's Media Ecosystem**

The fifth theme that emerged across interviews is on the issue of how Generation Z perceives and uses different social media platforms. As stated commonly in the interviews, this cohort does not treat all platforms equally. And they organize their digital behaviors according to a platform hierarchy. This platform hierarchy of Gen Z resulted in shaping how brands must plan their marketing strategies.

To start with, TikTok consistently emerged as the dominant gateway for first contact and discovery in the interviews. Expert E stressed that "*TikTok is extremely effective when it comes to engaging with Gen Z*" noting that the platform is "*profoundly used amongst the Gen Z generation*" She linked this to Gen Z's short attention span and TikTok's inherently high-stimulation environment. This features rapid visuals and instant entertainment which is in line with how this cohort consumes information. In this sense, TikTok functions as both a search tool and a cultural trend generator, which shapes early-stage awareness in the customer journey.

Focusing on the other social media channels that are behind TikTok in Gen Z's platform hierarchy, Instagram is positioned in second place. Although Instagram is still vital for Gen Z's everyday digital habits, its function has changed. Expert E explained that "*Instagram keeps its strong relevance among older Gen Z and younger millennials, who prefer slightly more curated and structured visual formats.*" Compared with TikTok's spontaneity and algorithm-based discovery, Instagram operates as a space for identity presentation and brand following. This platform-specific role division indicates how Gen Z strategically distributes attention based on the sort of content and desired interaction.

Furthermore, there is not a clear distinction across different cultures regarding the social media platform preferences of Gen Z. All experts noted the same pattern. This pattern is that TikTok and Instagram dominate Gen Z usage. Moreover, Snapchat and YouTube support more specific functions. As an example, Gen Z uses these two platforms for social communication or long-form learning. Instead, the differences were analyzed across generations rather than cultures. As Expert G noted, *“Millennials still use Instagram more, and for the older generation, such as Generation X, Facebook is stronger, while for Gen Z, it is more TikTok and Snapchat.”* This highlights that platform differentiation is driven more by generational media habits than by geographic or cultural context.

Expert G further mentioned that the media ecosystem of Gen Z is going beyond traditional social platforms. She said that *“LinkedIn works for several generations, including Gen Z, and ChatGPT is a tool that both Gen Z and Millennials use.”* Examining this statement, it is part of a larger trend toward hybrid digital behavior. This trend describes the environment in which entertainment-based platforms coexist with AI tools. Gen Z increasingly searches for information, discovers trends, and makes decisions on both social media platforms and in AI environments.

When examined together, the findings suggest a multilayered, generationally different, and more hybrid media ecosystem for Generation Z. Instagram encourages continuous interaction, TikTok promotes discovery, and new AI tools enhance established platforms by influencing search and assessment procedures. This means that effective communication strategies for marketing professionals need to consider not just where Gen Z is active but also how and why they use each platform at different stages of their digital journey.

#### **4.7 Theme 6: Future Outlook: AI, Hyper-Personalization, Gamification and Gen Alpha**

As the final theme derived from the expert interviews, there was a common agreement between experts that the next decade will bring important transformation in marketing. The main reasons behind this significant shift are rooted from in artificial intelligence, hyper-personalization, and the emergence of new generations to the market.

Across the interviews, experts agreed that the next decade will bring a significant transformation in digital marketing driven by artificial intelligence, hyper-personalization, and

evolving generational behaviors. Although Generation Z already demands speed, authenticity, and relevance, the experts suggested that in the future, brands will need to utilize even more technologically advanced and adaptable approaches to marketing.

As the core catalyst for this shift, AI was identified during the interviews. In detail, Expert E explained that over the past decade, AI has evolved from a distant emerging technology into an everyday consumer tool that shapes how individuals search, evaluate and compare products. Moreover, she noted that AI “*has given consumers a level of complexity and creativity*,” *allowing them to instantly find the “best price or the best solution”* for nearly any product. This increase in consumer intelligence challenged brands so that they are trying to be “*one step ahead of the consumer*”. That’s why brands need to target more advancedly and deliver smarter brand narratives. For Expert E, this means brands must focus on reaching audiences “*at the right time when it is most important to them*,”. This is underlining that there is a growing dependence on predictive algorithms and automated personalization for the brands.

In addition to that, Expert D contributed a generational perspective by highlighting early signals from Generation Alpha, which is the upcoming generation after Generation Z. She described Gen Alpha as “*even more convinced by the peer group*” than Gen Z. And she argued that this upcoming generation has an intensified reliance on social validation, trends and content based on groups. Moreover, she emphasized that the volume and variation of digital stimuli Gen Alpha receives “*already at their age*” will require brands to develop communication that is finely tailored to micro-segments. She further noted that as AI becomes “*more advanced to automate things more easily*,” hyper-personalization will no longer be a heavy resource task. Rather than that, she suggested hyper-personalization will be a standartized norm of digital communication. Due to the convergence of AI-driven automation and consumption guided by peers, it argues that Gen Alpha will require marketing to be more adaptive, contextual and socially embedded than ever before.

Another significant future trend that has emerged from the expert interview is gamification. As Expert C explained “*For Gen Z, gamification is pretty important. We will see a huge adoption on the product level, with many products implementing gamified elements to keep users more engaged, to bring them back to the platform and to drive activity levels higher. It is not only about brand awareness anymore, but about keeping the user active within the experience.*” Because the digital landscape is becoming more competitive, gamification is likely to expand from entertainment apps into sectors such as finance and retail. It will provide brands new ways

to differentiate their products while meeting Gen Z's and Gen Alpha's expectations regarding interactivity.

Together, these insights suggest that the future of digital marketing will be shaped by *algorithmic precision, interactive design, and deeper generational segmentation*. Gen Z has already accelerated the transformation for personalized and fast-paced communication, yet Gen Alpha is ready to raise these expectations even more. For brands, staying relevant with upcoming generations will require embracing AI-driven personalization, designing gamified experiences that maintain user engagement and delivering content that is both socially resonant and hyper-targeted across diverse market contexts.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### 5.1 Answering the Research Questions

The first research question examined how Gen Z influences the marketing strategies of brands. The findings show that Gen Z impacts brands at both structural and multidimensional levels. Their preference for fast and visual content, specifically the short-form video format, requires brands to redesign their marketing approaches. TikTok has become the primary source for discovery, while Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube serve as complementary sources for Gen Z. But each platform has distinct purposes in the customer journey of this cohort. It is significant that this platform hierarchy was observed consistently across all expert interviews, regardless of region. This suggests that generational habits take precedence over cultural differences. In other words, Gen Z demonstrates a globally aligned digital behavior pattern that necessitates unified yet flexible international marketing strategies.

The second research question explored how Gen Z's expectations, especially regarding authenticity, transparency and value alignment, impacted brand communication. The findings demonstrated that Gen Z does not assess brands solely on their functional performance but also through an ethical lens. In detail, this cohort actively verifies claims of the brands. They reward brands based on their honesty. When brands appear insincere or inconsistent to Generation Z, they quickly penalize them. Additionally, throughout the interviews, the experts highlighted the growing importance coming from peers, micro-influencers, and user-generated content in today's marketing strategies. These elements collectively replace the traditional and top-down model of brand authority. Therefore, brands are required to communicate in ways that are more

human, participatory and socially accountable. This shift indicates a deeper cultural transformation in which trust is no longer granted by reputation alone but is earned continuously through actions that align with Gen Z's values and expectations.

The third research question uncovered the future of marketing. The use of AI, hyper-personalization, and Generation Alpha were identified as the key points for this research question. It is predicted by the experts that AI is going to increase not only the consumer expectations but also the competitive pressures on brands. To be more precise, Gen Z is already demanding relevance and immediacy. Gen Alpha is supposed to take it even a step further. This upcoming generation is anticipated to be concerned with deeper personalization, alignment with peer groups and adaptable communication flows. Another significant element derived from the expert interviews regarding the future of marketing is the use of gamification. Gamification is an emerging mechanism to shape product design and product engagement. Therefore, it indicates a shift from passive content use to more interactive and participatory experiences. All these findings suggest that brands need to integrate themselves with advancing technologies like predictive analytics, automated targeting and dynamic personalization. It is an indicator that to sustain as a brand in the future, brands will be required to adapt to those technological developments across all platforms.

## **5.2 Practical Implications for Marketing Practice**

Beyond answering the research questions, the findings of this research also provide several useful suggestions for brands targeting Generation Z. To start with, brands should prioritize short-form video content on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. These platforms are the digital landscapes where the attention of Gen Z is captured within seconds, and messages must deliver immediate value for this cohort. Brands should use micro-influencers, UGC and participatory content in which Gen Z can see authentic everyday experiences. Since, this cohort does not influence by usage of polished images or celebrity endorsements. Also involving Gen Z consumers through interactive challenges, and community-based initiatives can also strengthen engagement and trust between brands and this cohort. These initiatives benefit brands by including Gen Z in their marketing practices as active contributors rather than passive audiences. Finally, as Gen Z is highly aware of algorithmic targeting, brands should combine AI personalization with transparency and consistent messaging across platforms to maintain long-term credibility and relevance.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

### 6.1 Summary of the Research Aim and Key Findings

To conclude this research, the findings show that Generation Z has a transformative force that shapes the fundamentals of contemporary brand communication. Rather than only responding to digital trends, brands are increasingly required to work and redesign their marketing strategies in line with the behavioral patterns, value expectations, and media consumption habits of this cohort. Furthermore, the findings of this research suggest that Generation Z actively influences marketing by challenging established practices of brands. Operating in an algorithmic and participatory media environment, Generation Z forces brands to move beyond traditional, top-down approaches to marketing strategies towards ones that emphasize their values. In examples, authenticity, immediacy and technological adaptability are crucial Gen Z values that brands need to take into consideration today.

In line with the research aim, this study provides an understanding of how these shifts are interpreted by marketing professionals and how they translate these shifts into strategic decisions. By combining theoretical insights with expert perspectives, the research clarifies not only how Generation Z shapes marketing practices, but also why existing approaches require fundamental adaptation to remain credible and effective.

### 6.2 Limitations of the Research

This research has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The research is based on a qualitative design with a limited number of expert interviews. This limits the ability of generalization of the findings. Furthermore, while experts represented diverse industries and regions, the perspectives remain interpretive and context specific. In the future studies these limitations can be addressed by benefiting from larger samples or mixed-method approaches.

### 6.3 Directions for Future Research

Considering future research, it should build on these findings by investigating the role of algorithmic mechanisms that shape content that is exposed to Gen Z. Furthermore, future research should investigate the role of AI-assisted search versus social discovery. Another crucial point for future research should examine the developing differences between Generation Z and Generation Alpha as digital natives become more diverse. Continued research could offer important information on how patterns of attention and levels of loyalty to platforms evolve. Lastly, cross-platform ethnographic research could also provide important information about

the entertainment, social verification, and purchase behaviors that blend through AI-powered hybrid journeys.

#### **6.4 Concluding Remarks**

In the end, the findings of the research demonstrate that Generation Z is a revolutionary force in marketing rather than just another generation group. Their influence presents a strong indication of how marketing will continue to evolve with future generations. And the Gen Z expectations are changing how brands need to communicate. For marketing professionals, this requires to constantly be open to listening, adapting, and co-creating in rapidly changing digital environments. For academic literature, it highlights the necessity of continuing research into the generational shift and its strategic effects.

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