

Digital Natives vs. Digital Pioneers: The Impact of Social Media Marketing on Purchase Attitudes and Satisfaction in Generation Y and Z

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Abstract

Background: Generation Y, often described as digital pioneers, came of age before the widespread adoption of the internet and social media; therefore, technology serves more as a tool for this cohort. In contrast, Generation Z, commonly characterised as true digital natives, was born into a hyper-connected environment shaped by smartphones and high-speed internet, making technology a more integral part of daily life.

Purpose: This study aims to examine the differences between Generation Y and Generation Z users in their attitudes towards marketing communication on social media, as well as their purchase attitudes and satisfaction in the social media environment.

Study design/methodology/approach: Data were collected online using a structured questionnaire conducted between April and June 2024. The survey instrument was distributed to Generation Y and Generation Z social media users on Facebook and Instagram. To address the research aim, factor analysis and analysis of variance were applied.

Findings/conclusions: The results indicate significant differences between the extracted factors and users' attitudes towards purchasing via social media. The analysis of variance also revealed statistically significant differences between the factors and users' satisfaction with purchases made through social media. Overall, the findings suggest that marketing communication on social media plays an important role in influencing users' purchase attitudes and satisfaction, particularly among Generations Y and Z.

Limitations/future research: The findings may offer useful implications for researchers and practitioners by indicating that social media marketing communication aimed at Generation Y and Generation Z should combine entertaining and informative elements. Future research could further examine these relationships across other social media platforms, broader demographic groups, and additional behavioural outcomes.

Keywords

Social media marketing communication, purchase attitude, purchase intentions, Generation Y, Generation Z

Introduction

The early 21st century has been characterised by rapid technological and social change, with Generation Y and Generation Z emerging as two of

the most influential cohorts in the digital marketplace. These generations are strategically important consumer segments and are among the most active participants in social media environments (Bolton et al., 2013; Hazzam, 2022).

Generation Y is typically seen as a cohort shaped by the expansion of the internet and social media, while Generation Z is more often described as digital natives, having grown up in an always-connected environment defined by smartphones, social platforms, and constant digital interaction (Bolton et al., 2013; Priporas et al., 2017). Consequently, technology functions more as a tool for Generation Y, whereas for Generation Z it is more deeply integrated into everyday communication, identity formation, and consumption practices.

Digital literacy, broadly defined as the ability to access, evaluate, communicate, and use digital technologies effectively, is now a core competence for successful participation in contemporary digital societies (van Laar et al., 2017). In this context, social media no longer serve solely as spaces for networking or entertainment; they have become commercial ecosystems where consumers encounter brand messages, compare alternatives, evaluate products, follow creators and influencers, and increasingly make purchase-related decisions (Sajid et al., 2026). The effectiveness of marketing communication in these environments depends not only on exposure, but also on how communication is perceived in terms of informativeness, interactivity, entertainment, credibility, and relevance to the user (Kocarslan & Stoycheva, 2025; Alalwan, 2018; McClure & Seock, 2020; Lu & Chen, 2021). Recent research also suggests that the strategic value of social media communication lies in its ability to connect platform affordances, source credibility, and consumer attitudes in ways that translate into brand-related and behavioural outcomes (Ooi et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2025).

Although both Generation Y and Generation Z are highly competent users of digital media, they do not engage with social platforms in the same ways. Generation Y is more often associated with brand-related interaction, online evaluation, and participation in digital brand communities, whereas Generation Z tends to engage with social media in a more creator-led and socially comparative environment, where influencer content, peer cues, and branded posts are closely linked to product evaluation and purchase-related responses (Carlson et al., 2021; Tian et al., 2023). Earlier research has described Generation Y as well-informed, open to diversity, and accustomed to increasing online access to knowledge, while Generation Z is more strongly influenced by visual communication, platform culture, and creator-led ecosystems (Bolton et al., 2013; Urbain et al.,

2013). Comparative evidence further indicates that generational cohorts differ in how they search for brands, engage with social media content, and form marketplace preferences, even when both groups are highly active online (Bento et al., 2018). These distinctions make Generation Y and Generation Z especially relevant for examining how social media marketing communication is processed and translated into purchase-related responses.

A growing body of research indicates that the effects of social media marketing communication are best understood through both affective and cognitive mechanisms. Communication is more persuasive when it is not only attractive, enjoyable, and socially resonant, but also informative, useful, and able to reduce uncertainty before purchase. This is particularly evident in studies of influencer marketing and social commerce, where parasocial interaction, trust, inspiration, and perceived credibility play a central role in shaping consumer response (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Belanche et al., 2021; Farivar et al., 2021; Ki et al., 2022). At the same time, a growing body of research highlights the importance of authenticity, disclosure, and the relational logic of influencer communication, arguing that consumer reactions are sensitive to whether promotional content is perceived as credible, transparent, and consistent with the influencer's persona (Kim & Kim, 2021; Audrezet et al., 2020; Sheng et al., 2024; Waltenrath, 2024).

Previous literature also shows that social media marketing activities can influence purchase intention directly and indirectly through brand trust, brand experience, brand engagement, and consumer-brand interaction (Khan, 2022; Gutierrez et al., 2023; Zeqiri et al., 2025). However, much of this research focuses primarily on purchase intention, engagement, or influencer effectiveness, while fewer studies examine both purchase attitudes and purchase satisfaction within the same analytical framework, particularly in a comparative Generation Y–Generation Z context. The present study addresses this gap by examining whether users' attitudes towards social media marketing communication can be interpreted through two broader dimensions that are both theoretically meaningful and empirically testable: brand appeal, representing the emotional and experiential side of communication, and brand awareness, representing the informational and cognitive side.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to determine the differences between Generation Y and Generation Z users' attitudes towards marketing

communication on social media, as well as their purchase attitudes and satisfaction in the social media environment. The findings may help researchers and practitioners better understand how social media communication should be designed to be engaging, informative, and aligned with the expectations of younger digital consumers.

1. Literature review

Social media marketing communication is increasingly recognised as a multidimensional form of brand–consumer interaction, rather than simply an extension of traditional advertising. In digital environments, consumers are not just exposed to promotional messages; they interpret, evaluate, and respond to communication. Consequently, the persuasive power of social media communication relies less on visibility alone and more on how it is perceived in terms of relevance, interactivity, entertainment, informativeness, and credibility (Alalwan, 2018; Khan, 2022; Ooi et al., 2023; Zeqiri et al., 2025). This perspective is particularly important in platform-based consumption contexts, where commercial content is integrated into everyday browsing, social exchange, and identity performance.

One of the central themes in recent literature is the affective and experiential aspect of digital communication. Consumers tend to respond more positively when branded or influencer-generated content is perceived as enjoyable, attractive, vivid, socially engaging, and personally meaningful (Bazi et al., 2020; Bazi et al., 2023). In these cases, persuasion is driven not only by rational product evaluation, but also by emotional resonance, perceived closeness, and symbolic alignment with the source of communication. This is particularly evident in influencer-related contexts, where parasocial interaction, credibility, inspiration, and relational attachment can influence purchase-related responses more strongly than formal advertising cues alone (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Belanche et al., 2021; Farivar et al., 2021). The concept of influencers as “human brands” further supports this logic, as followers often value content not only because of the product being promoted, but also because the communication fulfils psychological and identity-related needs (Ki et al., 2020). Related research has also linked inspirational content and social identification with stronger consumer responsiveness, suggesting that emotional stimulation and perceived social

relevance are central components of persuasive communication on social media (Ki et al., 2022; Andonopoulos et al., 2023).

This affective dimension is closely linked to the way content is designed and delivered. Communication that is aesthetically appealing, enjoyable, and engaging is more likely to attract attention, generate liking, and encourage favourable behavioural orientation (Onofrei et al., 2022; Barta et al., 2023). In this sense, follower response depends not only on who communicates, but also on how communication is structured, how interaction is maintained, and whether the content invites emotional participation. Such dynamics are evident in research on Instagram engagement and online brand-related activities, where content quality, creativity, and engagement strategy contribute to stronger audience response and deeper interaction with brand messages (Tafesse & Wood, 2021; Cheung et al., 2022). Within the framework of the present study, this body of literature supports treating brand appeal as a distinct dimension of social media marketing communication, reflecting enjoyment, liking, preference, interest, and positive affective response towards communication encountered on social media.

At the same time, social media communication performs an important cognitive and informational function. Consumers frequently use digital platforms to search for product knowledge, monitor brands, evaluate alternatives, and reduce uncertainty prior to purchase (Mikalef et al., 2021; Al-Adwan & Yaseen, 2023). In this respect, social media serve not only as spaces for entertainment and interaction, but also as environments for information acquisition and evaluative judgement. The persuasiveness of communication is therefore shaped by its ability to provide useful, credible, timely, and decision-relevant information (Zha et al., 2018). Prior research has linked purchase-related responses to perceived informativeness, relevance, and communication quality, indicating that consumers engage more deeply with brand content when it helps them make sense of products, offers, and marketplace choices (Alalwan, 2018; McClure & Seock, 2020). This role becomes even more pronounced in social commerce and live-streaming contexts, where direct physical inspection is absent and informational cues help compensate for uncertainty surrounding quality, fit, and trustworthiness (Lu & Chen, 2021; Sun et al., 2019; Yan et al., 2023).

From this perspective, marketing communication influences consumer response by enabling users to follow brands, track new offers, acquire additional product knowledge, and feel more confident in their purchase decisions. Interactivity is important, not only as a source of engagement, but as a mechanism that makes communication more intelligible, responsive, and useful over time. This aligns with research showing that interactive brand environments on social media encourage continued participation and strengthen users' perceived experience of the brand (Kuo & Chen, 2023), while ongoing consumer–brand interaction can support purchase intention when users perceive communication as attentive and meaningful (Gutierrez et al., 2023). In the context of the present study, this line of research corresponds to the dimension labelled brand awareness, which captures the informational and cognitive aspects of social media marketing communication through awareness, product knowledge, brand-following, and the perceived usefulness of communication.

Another issue identified in the literature concerns authenticity, transparency, and communicative credibility. Consumers in social media environments are highly sensitive to persuasive intent, and their responses are influenced by whether communication appears trustworthy, balanced, and socially legitimate (Kim et al., 2021). This is especially relevant in influencer marketing, where sponsorship disclosure, commercial saturation, and excessive endorsement may affect how communication is interpreted. The effectiveness of influencer-led promotion is therefore not simply a matter of visibility or popularity, but of maintaining a communicative style that remains persuasive without losing credibility (Bu et al., 2022; Sheng et al., 2024; Cheah et al., 2024). At the same time, the relationship between authenticity and effectiveness is not entirely linear, as consumers may still respond positively to content perceived as less authentic when it retains inspirational value or symbolic resonance (Andonopoulos et al., 2023). This indicates that successful social media communication depends on balancing emotional attractiveness and cognitive trustworthiness, rather than relying on either alone.

These theoretical insights are particularly relevant when examining Generation Y and Generation Z. Although both cohorts are highly active in digital environments, previous research indicates that they do not necessarily respond to the

same communication cues in the same way (García-Carrión et al., 2023). Generational differences in brand engagement and brand search on social media suggest that platform users derive different forms of value from digital communication depending on their socialisation with technology and consumption habits (Bento et al., 2018). Recent studies on younger consumers also suggest that persuasive effectiveness increases when social media communication combines utility with entertainment, and information with relational engagement (Ooi et al., 2023; Santoso, 2024; Shamim et al., 2024). This is particularly relevant for a comparative analysis of Generation Y and Generation Z, as both groups are active users of Facebook and Instagram, yet may differ in the importance they assign to usefulness, enjoyment, immediacy, credibility, and visual appeal.

Taken together, the literature suggests that social media marketing communication can be meaningfully organised around two broader, theoretically compatible dimensions. The first is an emotional-experiential dimension associated with attractiveness, enjoyment, preference, and positive affective response. The second is an informational-cognitive dimension, associated with awareness, product knowledge, usefulness, and credibility of communication. Therefore, social media marketing communication is conceptualised here through brand appeal and brand awareness, both of which are expected to influence users' purchase attitudes and satisfaction with purchases made via social media. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Brand appeal has a positive and significant effect on users' purchase attitudes on social media.
H2: Brand awareness has a positive and significant effect on users' purchase attitudes on social media.
H3: Brand appeal has a positive and significant effect on users' satisfaction with purchases on social media.

H4: Brand awareness has a positive and significant effect on users' satisfaction with purchases on social media.

2. Data and methodology

The data were collected online using a structured questionnaire. The survey was conducted between April and June 2024. The survey instrument was distributed via social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Instagram. Consequently, the target respondents were young users representing tech-savvy millennials or Generation Y (aged 25 to 44) and highly engaged Generation Z (aged 18 to 24)

within the social media environment (Nadeem et al., 2015; Priporas et al., 2019). These two generations were born into the internet era and engage extensively with social media (Kamboj et al., 2018; Hazzam, 2022), making them a relevant sample for social media research. Convenience sampling was used to collect the data. The first section of the questionnaire included socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, education level, occupation, and a usage variable (e.g., Do you follow popular brands on social media? Do you think social media influences purchases? Do ads on social media encourage you to make a purchase?). The second section contained 30 statements relating to respondents' attitudes towards awareness, knowledge, liking, and preferences regarding social media marketing communications, as well as purchase behaviour and intentions. The adapted statements were taken from previous research by Duffett (2020) and Duffett et al. (2019). Attitudes towards purchase were measured by one statement (I love buying products via social media), and purchase satisfaction was measured with one statement (Are you satisfied with the purchase you made after viewing the ad?).

The statements were measured using an ordinal scale from 1 to 5, with respondents indicating their level of agreement or disagreement (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). However, only the statement on purchase satisfaction was measured using an ordinal scale from 1 to 5, where respondents indicated their level of satisfaction (1 = very dissatisfied, 5 = very satisfied). Table 1 shows the usage variable for the sample.

Table 1 Usage variable of the sample

Usage variable	N	Percentage (%)
Follows brand		
Yes	215	62.0
No	132	38.0
Total	347	100
Social media purchase influence		
Yes	322	92.8
No	25	7.2
Total	347	100
Ads purchase influence on social media		
Yes	288	83.0
No	59	17.0
Total	347	100

Source: the authors

The collected data were analysed using the statistical software package SPSS 29. Various multivariate and inferential statistical analyses

were also applied, including factor analysis and analysis of variance

3. Research results

Exploratory factor analysis was used to assess the validity and reliability factors that may influence the impact of marketing communication on purchasing attitude and satisfaction on social media. Before conducting the multivariate statistical analysis, it is necessary to determine the reliability of the social media marketing communication measurement scale. Table 1 presents the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the social media marketing communication measurement scale.

Table 2 Reliability of the social media marketing communication measurement scale

Number of variables	Cronbach's Alpha
19	.946

Source: the authors

The results demonstrate high reliability of the scale for measuring marketing communication in social media, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.946, exceeding the 0.70 threshold recommended by Bagozzi and Yi (1988) for reliability. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was selected as the most suitable method to identify factors influencing the impact of marketing communication on social media users' purchase behaviour and intentions. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test (Kingsley Bernard et al., 2020) for sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test for sphericity were performed to assess the suitability of factor analysis. The KMO value was 0.865, indicating good reliability of the factors (minimum 0.60). Furthermore, Bartlett's test for sphericity produced a significance level of .0000 and a sphericity value of 4519.154, demonstrating a strong relationship between the items and confirming their suitability for factor analysis (Pallant, 2010). Factor analysis requires a large sample size, as it relies on the correlation matrix of the variables, and correlations generally stabilise with larger samples: 50 cases is very poor, 100 is poor, 200 is fair, 300 is good, 500 is very good, and 1000 or more is excellent [32]. Accordingly, two components or variables with eigenvalues above 1 were extracted from a sample of 347 users from Generation Y and Z (Table 3).

Table 3 Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	9.73	51.24	51.24	7.89	41.53	41.53
2	1.96	10.36	61.60	3.81	20.06	61.60

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Source: the authors

The table presents all the factors extracted from the analysis, their eigenvalues, the percentage of variance attributable to each factor, and the

cumulative variance for factors above 50%. The results show that factor 1 explains 41.54% of the total variance, while factor 2 accounts for 20.06%. Together, these two factors explain more than 61.6% of the total variance. All remaining factors are not significant. The following graph displays the scree plot of the eigenvalues against all the factors, which is useful for determining how many factors to retain. The curve begins to flatten between factors 2 and 3. Factor 3 has an eigenvalue of less than 1, so only two factors have been retained (Figure 1).

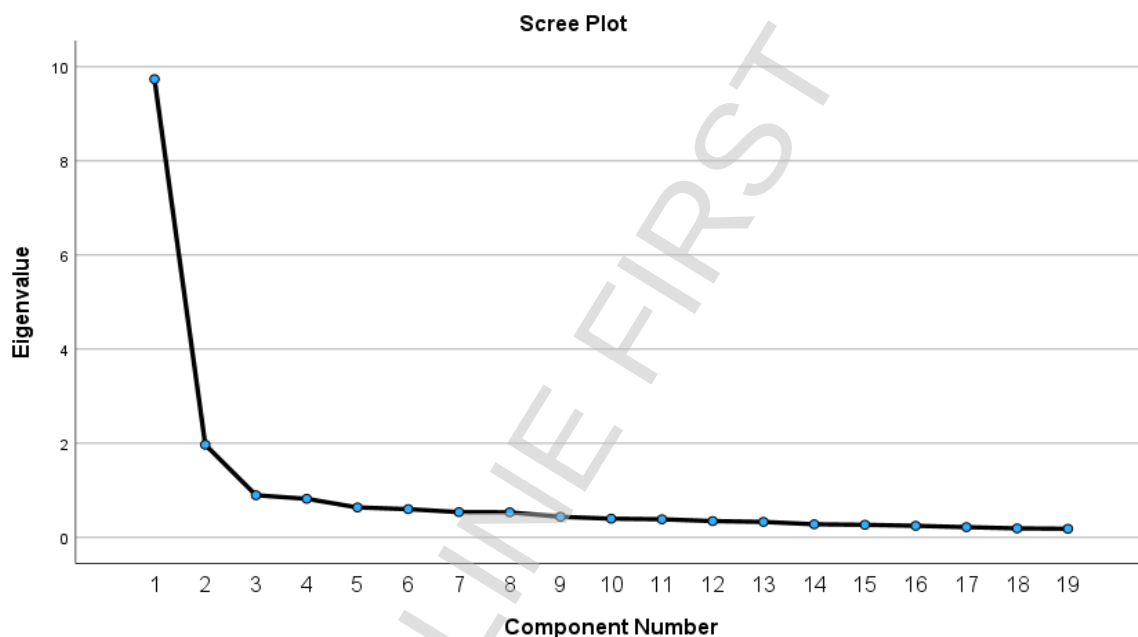


Figure 1 Eigenvalues against all factors
Source: the authors

The results of the factor analysis indicate excellent convergent and discriminant validity. Based on the content of the statements, factor 1 highlights the user's emotional and preferential response and is referred to as the brand appeal factor. It primarily reflects positive attitudes towards communication via social media, such as likeable and pleasant interactions. Factor 2 relates to the reliability and credibility of information and is therefore termed the brand awareness factor. It mainly encompasses appropriate product information, additional product details, news, and new offers. The purpose of the factor analysis is achieved, and the interpretation of the factors is satisfactory. The following table presents the rotated matrix for the measurement scale, showing which variables have high loadings. The matrix of

the rotated factor structure achieves data reduction and provides the best summary of the linear relationships. The results indicate high factor loadings and a clear two-factor structure, with no substantial cross-loadings among the items. All variables load significantly on Factor 1 and Factor 2, and these factors can be used as variables for further analysis (Table 4).

Table 4 Rotated component Matrix

	Factor 1	Factor 2
Marketing communication on social media has a positive influence on my liking of advertised products.	.837	
Advertising on social media is effective in stimulating my preference for brands.	.823	
I prefer brands that are promoted on social media.	.808	

Marketing communication on social media is effective in gaining my interest in products.	.800	
Marketing communication on social media contributes to my satisfaction with using social networks.	.797	
Marketing communication on social media has a positive influence on my choice of certain products.	.793	
Marketing communication on social media has a positive effect on my preference for brands	.786	
Marketing communication on social media is likeable and pleasant.	.768	
Marketing communication on social media is fun and useful.	.745	
I am interested in products advertised on social media.	.728	
Marketing communication on social media is relevant to me and my interests.	.719	
Marketing communication on social media makes me like brands more.	.714	
I am aware of the impact of new marketing communication on social media.		.726
Marketing communication on social media helps me follow a particular brand.		.697
Marketing communication on social media informs me about new offers from the company.		.683
Marketing communication on social media provides me with additional product knowledge.		.677
Social media ads are effective in providing information about brands.		.658
Marketing communication on social media is a good source of information.		.629
I use marketing communication on social media to find out about new products.		.612

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

Source: the authors

After the factor analysis, which extracted two factors, further analysis was conducted using analysis of variance to determine the differences between the extracted factors and users' attitudes towards social media purchasing and purchase satisfaction. Table 5 presents the results of the analysis between the extracted factors and users' attitudes towards buying on social media.

Table 5 Analysis of variance between factors and users' attitudes towards purchasing on social media

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Brand appeal	32.122	3	10.707	11.701	<.001
Brand awareness	38.637	3	12.879	14.372	<.001

Source: the authors

As shown in Table 5, there are significant differences between the extracted factors and attitudes towards buying on social media. For the first factor, the analysis of variance reveals significant differences between the brand appeal factor and attitudes towards buying on social media ($p < 0.001$, $F = 11.701$). The results indicate that

these users are likely to purchase advertised products and that marketing communication positively influences their purchasing behaviour when the company's content includes fun and enjoyable elements. Users willing to buy via social media are more receptive to marketing communication they perceive as positive. The results also show a statistically significant difference between the brand awareness factor and attitudes towards buying via social media ($p < 0.001$, $F = 14.372$). Generation Y and Z users are more likely to accept and purchase products advertised on social media if they have additional information about the functionality and quality of these products. They regard social media as a good source for new information and offers, and follow particular brands to make informed purchase decisions. The analysis of variance (Table 6) is conducted to determine whether there is a difference between the extracted factors and the purchase intentions of social media users.

Table 6 Analysis of variance between factors and users' satisfaction with purchases on social media

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Brand appeal	150.348	4	37.587	65.702	<.001
Brand awareness	23.502	4	5.875	6.231	<.001

Source: the authors

As shown in Table 6, there are significant differences between the extracted factors and users' satisfaction with purchasing on social media. For the first factor, the analysis of variance indicates significant differences between the brand appeal factor and users' satisfaction with purchasing on social media ($p < 0.001$, $F = 65.702$). The results show that Generation Y and Z users who use social media primarily for entertainment and enjoyable communication are more satisfied with purchasing on social media. The analysis also reveals a significant difference between the brand awareness factor and users' satisfaction with purchasing on social media ($p < 0.001$, $F = 6.231$). There are differences between users who seek informative and helpful content and their satisfaction with purchasing on social media. This suggests that Generation Y and Z users are more likely to seek useful and educational content, as they recognise the importance of being informed before making a purchase on social media. They believe that such content is crucial for making the right purchasing decision, which leads to satisfaction with the purchase.

Conclusion

The digital landscape has fundamentally reshaped consumer behaviour through social media platforms. This transformation is most evident among Generation Y and Generation Z. Although both generations are highly active on social media, their engagement patterns and susceptibility to marketing tactics on Instagram and Facebook differ significantly.

The results provide new insights into the direct influence of perceived marketing communication on the purchasing behaviour and satisfaction of social media users. The findings show that the extracted factors influence the buying behaviour and satisfaction of Generation Z on social media. These users are more likely to purchase products featured on social media if they find the marketing communication and advertising enjoyable and appealing. Content that is relevant and specifically tailored to their interests and needs will significantly affect their purchasing attitudes. If users also find the content entertaining and engaging, they are more satisfied with their purchases on social media. Personalised marketing communication with entertainment elements tailored to users' interests can significantly determine the level of engagement and involvement of Generation Y and Z users. Moreover, it is important that marketing communication acts as a reliable source of information, providing additional knowledge about products and helping users follow their favourite brands and special offers. Such content encourages users to pursue advertised products, leading to a positive buying attitude and satisfaction with their purchases. These users are more likely to respond to this type of marketing communication to make informed purchase decisions, resulting in overall user satisfaction.

The research findings indicate that companies should incorporate entertaining and informative elements in their social media marketing communications to influence buying attitudes and increase purchase satisfaction among Generation Y and Z users. Campaigns that combine personalised storytelling with actionable product knowledge are likely to build users' trust, encourage purchase decisions, and enhance post-purchase satisfaction.

Regarding limitations, the study uses a convenience sample consisting only of Facebook and Instagram users from Generations Y and Z, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Including users from other platforms with different interaction patterns (e.g., TikTok or Snapchat)

could improve the outcomes of the paper. Additionally, the research design relies on self-reported data, which does not fully reflect actual purchasing behaviour and records attitudes at a single point in time, preventing observation of changes in user perceptions over time. One limitation of this study is the use of a single-item measure for shopping attitude and shopping satisfaction. While single-item measures may be suitable for obtaining specific evaluations, they do not allow for a comprehensive assessment of internal consistency reliability. Future research should use validated multi-item measurement scales to improve the precision and robustness of the measurements, thereby improving the quality of future research results.

The research was conducted only in Croatia, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other cultural or national contexts. Although social media usage patterns are relatively global, cultural differences in consumer behaviour may influence the applicability of the results elsewhere. Future studies could also include additional generational cohorts, such as Generation X or Alpha, to enable longitudinal intergenerational comparisons. Furthermore, examining why certain forms of marketing communication appeal differently to Generations Y and Z could provide further insight into the psychological drivers behind this.

Declaration

Availability of data and materials

The datasets analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

During the preparation of this manuscript, we used the INSTATEX tool solely for language editing. We thoroughly reviewed the manuscript afterward and accept full responsibility for its intellectual content.

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