

Shifting consumer behavior in the digital marketing ecosystem: Insights from marketing messages targeting Generation Z

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Abstract

The rapid growth of digital marketing has transformed how companies engage with Generation Z consumers. However, many marketing strategies continue to rely on demographic segmentation, product-oriented promotion, and conventional communication, limiting the understanding of contemporary consumer behavior shifts. This study aims to analyze the marketing messages conveyed in the Instagram post “6 Kesalahan Brand Saat Marketing ke Anak Muda di 2026”. A qualitative approach employing qualitative content analysis was used to examine six marketing messages through unit identification, initial coding, category development, theme generation, and conceptual synthesis. The findings reveal three interconnected dimensions—experience, behavioral segmentation, and authentic trust—that collectively shape consumer behavior shift. The results indicate that marketing effectiveness is no longer primarily driven by product promotion or communicator popularity but by a brand's ability to create meaningful experiences, understand consumers through behavioral segmentation, and establish authentic trust. This study contributes a conceptual model, *Consumer Behavior Shift in the Digital Marketing Ecosystem*, which extends consumer behavior literature by integrating these three dimensions into a unified framework for digital marketing contexts.

Keywords: Consumer behavior; Generation Z; Digital marketing; Social commerce; Content analysis

Abstrak

Perkembangan pemasaran digital telah mengubah cara perusahaan berkomunikasi dengan Generasi Z, namun banyak strategi pemasaran masih berorientasi pada segmentasi demografis, promosi produk, dan komunikasi konvensional sehingga belum mampu menjelaskan pergeseran perilaku konsumen secara komprehensif. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis pesan-pesan pemasaran dalam unggahan Instagram “6 Kesalahan Brand Saat Marketing ke Anak Muda di 2026”. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode *qualitative content analysis* terhadap enam pesan pemasaran yang dianalisis melalui proses identifikasi unit analisis, pengodean awal, pengembangan kategori, pembentukan tema, dan sintesis konseptual. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi tiga dimensi utama, yaitu *experience*, *behavioral segmentation*, dan *authentic trust*, yang saling berinteraksi dalam membentuk *consumer behavior shift*. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa efektivitas pemasaran tidak lagi ditentukan oleh promosi produk atau popularitas komunikator, melainkan oleh kemampuan merek menciptakan pengalaman yang bermakna, memahami perilaku konsumen secara adaptif, serta membangun kepercayaan yang autentik. Penelitian ini menawarkan model konseptual *Consumer Behavior Shift in the Digital Marketing Ecosystem* sebagai kontribusi teoretis untuk memperluas kajian perilaku konsumen pada konteks pemasaran digital.

Kata Kunci: Perilaku konsumen; Generasi Z; Pemasaran digital; *Social commerce*; Analisis isi

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the way consumers search for information, interact with brands, and make purchasing decisions (Melumad et al., 2020). This transformation is particularly evident among Generation Z, a generation that has grown up alongside the rapid expansion of the internet, social media, and various digital platforms (Kullolli & Trebicka, 2023). Unlike previous generations, Generation Z no longer relies exclusively on information provided by companies but actively seeks reviews, experiences, and recommendations from other users before deciding to purchase a product or service (Theocharis, 2025). Consequently, consumer behavior has shifted from product-oriented consumption toward a decision-making process that is increasingly influenced by digital experiences, social interactions, and online communities.

This shift has been driven by the rapid development of social media, social commerce, and the broader digital ecosystem, which enables consumers not only to receive information but also to create, disseminate, and evaluate it (Liu, 2025). Within this ecosystem, marketing communication is no longer entirely controlled by companies; instead, it is shaped through interactions among brands, content creators, digital communities, and consumers (Kozinets, 2022). As a result, factors such as experience, authenticity, trust, and the relevance of marketing messages have become increasingly influential in shaping consumer decisions. Conversely, conventional marketing approaches that emphasize product promotion, demographic segmentation, and one-way communication have become progressively less effective in engaging Generation Z consumers.

These changes are also reflected in the way Generation Z evaluates and responds to marketing messages. Consumers no longer assess products solely based on their quality but also consider the experiences they offer, the relevance of marketing messages to their personal needs, and the credibility of the information source delivering those messages (Azemi & Ozuem, 2023). Consequently, the consumer decision-making process has become increasingly complex, involving the interaction of experience, behavioral characteristics, and trust developed within digital environments. Therefore, understanding consumer behavior in the digital era requires more than merely identifying the factors influencing purchase decisions; it also requires examining how marketing messages represent and shape changes in consumer behavior (Tafesse & Wien, 2018).

Understanding these behavioral changes has become increasingly important because the mismatch between marketing strategies and the characteristics of Generation Z may reduce marketing communication effectiveness and consumer engagement with brands (Munsch, 2021). Many companies continue to rely on demographic

segmentation, celebrity endorsements, and product-centered promotional strategies, whereas Generation Z places greater value on meaningful experiences, authentic communication, and recommendations from digital communities (Kumar et al., 2026). This discrepancy highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of how consumer behavior evolves within the digital marketing ecosystem, enabling companies to develop marketing strategies that adapt to the dynamic characteristics of Generation Z consumers.

Researchers have examined Generation Z consumer behavior in the context of digital marketing from various perspectives. Singh (2024) found that online purchase intention is influenced by perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, trust, security, and privacy of digital platforms. Ngo et al. (2024) demonstrated that the quality, credibility, and quantity of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) play a significant role in enhancing purchase intention, while Wang and Shahzad (2024), through a meta-analysis, identified trust, social influence, and perceived value as the primary determinants of consumer behavior in social commerce. In the Indonesian context, Auliya et al. (2025) identified that fear of missing out (FoMO), subjective norms, and self-efficacy significantly influence Generation Z engagement in social commerce, whereas Huwaida et al. (2024) found that information quality, interactivity, and both utilitarian and hedonic expectations significantly affect purchase intention. Although these studies have made important contributions, they predominantly employ quantitative approaches to examine relationships among variables, providing limited insight into how marketing messages represent and shape consumer behavior in a holistic manner. Therefore, further research is needed to interpret marketing messages while explaining the relationships among experience, behavioral segmentation, and authentic trust within a unified conceptual framework of consumer behavior shift.

Based on this research gap, the present study aims to analyze the marketing messages conveyed in the Instagram post "*6 Kesalahan Brand Saat Marketing ke Anak Muda di 2026*" using a qualitative content analysis approach from the perspective of Consumer Behavior Theory. Unlike previous studies that primarily examined causal relationships among variables through quantitative methods, this study develops the conceptual model of *Consumer Behavior Shift in the Digital Marketing Ecosystem*, which explains the interrelationships among experience, behavioral segmentation, and authentic trust in shaping Generation Z consumer behavior. The proposed conceptual model is expected to enrich the consumer behavior literature within the context of digital marketing while providing practical implications for companies in designing marketing strategies that are more adaptive, authentic, and aligned with the characteristics of Generation Z consumers.

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using qualitative content analysis to identify and interpret marketing messages targeting Generation Z consumers within the digital marketing ecosystem (Krippendorff, 2019). This method was selected because it enables researchers to systematically uncover the meanings, patterns, and relationships embedded in communication messages through a structured process of coding and theme development. The primary data source consisted of an Instagram post published by the Marketeers account entitled "6 Kesalahan Brand Saat Marketing ke Anak Muda di 2026" ("6 Brand Mistakes in Marketing to Young People in 2026"), comprising six slides. The post was purposively selected because it explicitly represents contemporary issues related to marketing strategies targeting Generation Z, thereby providing rich units of analysis for identifying shifts in consumer behavior (Creswell, 2014). The unit of analysis in this study was each marketing message contained in the six slides, while recent scholarly literature on consumer behavior, digital marketing, Generation Z, social commerce, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) was used as supporting references during the interpretation of the findings.

The data were analyzed through four sequential stages. The first stage involved identifying the units of analysis by examining the marketing messages presented in each slide of the Instagram post. The second stage consisted of initial coding to identify key concepts, marketing characteristics, and the meanings embedded within each message. Subsequently, conceptually related codes were grouped through the process of category development to establish broader analytical categories, which were then refined into research themes through theme generation. The analysis resulted in three principal themes: experience, behavioral segmentation, and authentic trust. These themes were subsequently interpreted using Consumer Behavior Theory to explain their interrelationships in shaping Generation Z consumer behavior. In the final stage, all themes were synthesized into a conceptual model entitled *Consumer Behavior Shift in the Digital Marketing Ecosystem*, which constitutes the primary finding of this study.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, theoretical validation was conducted by comparing the identified themes with concepts derived from Consumer Behavior Theory as well as empirical findings reported in previous studies (Moleong, 2002). Throughout the analytical process, each interpretation was continuously re-examined to ensure consistency between the original data, the developed categories, the resulting themes, and the proposed conceptual model. This procedure ensured that the conceptual model emerged as a synthesis derived directly from the empirical analysis rather than merely reflecting existing theoretical assumptions, thereby strengthening the consistency, credibility, and analytical rigor of the study.

Results and Discussion

Marketing Messages in the Instagram Post "6 Brand Mistakes in Marketing to Young People in 2026"

The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed the way brands interact with consumers, particularly Generation Z, who have grown up alongside social media and various digital platforms. Nevertheless, many marketing strategies continue to be developed based on the assumption that all young consumers share similar characteristics, preferences, and behavioral patterns. This assumption has become increasingly questionable, as Generation Z demonstrates more complex, dynamic consumption patterns that are strongly influenced by digital experiences, online communities, and authenticity-driven values. Within this context, many conventional marketing practices are becoming less relevant, prompting discussions on the need for marketing approaches that are more adaptive to the characteristics of Generation Z.

Table 1. Marketing Messages in the Instagram Post "6 Brand Mistakes in Marketing to Young People in 2026"

Slide	Marketing Message	Content Summary
1	Digital Presence Alone Is Not Enough	Brands should not rely solely on digital marketing but should also create direct experiences through events, pop-up stores, and memorable interactive activities.
2	Treating Millennials and Generation Z as a Single Segment	Generation Z exhibits diverse interests, lifestyles, digital platform preferences, and communication styles, making it inappropriate to treat them as a homogeneous consumer group.
3	Overreliance on Macro Influencers	Generation Z places greater trust in micro-influencers and content creators perceived as authentic than in individuals with large follower bases.
4	Using Irrelevant Nostalgia	Nostalgia-based marketing is more effective when it resonates with Generation Z's own life experiences rather than those of previous generations.
5	Selling Products Instead of Solutions	Generation Z is more attracted to products that solve real-life problems than to claims emphasizing product superiority alone.
6	Relying on Conventional Advertising	Generation Z places greater trust in organic content, user recommendations, and digital communities than in traditional advertising.

Source: Marketeers Instagram Account (2026).

As shown in Table 1, the six marketing messages consistently highlight the contrast between conventional marketing practices and the actual characteristics of Generation Z consumers. Nearly all messages begin by criticizing outdated marketing approaches that brands continue to adopt before presenting the preferences of Generation Z, which emphasize experience, authenticity, behavioral diversity, and more

personalized interactions. This communication pattern suggests that marketing effectiveness no longer depends on generalized strategies but instead requires a deeper understanding of consumer behavior. These findings are consistent with Theodorakopoulos and Theodoropoulou (2024), who reported that the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies is increasingly determined by consumer behavioral characteristics rather than demographic attributes alone. Similarly, Douglas Olsen and Pracejus (2020) found that marketing communication tailored to consumer preferences significantly enhances engagement and generates more favorable brand responses.

Furthermore, the content demonstrates that consumer experience has become one of the most prominent elements in marketing strategies targeting Generation Z. This is reflected in the emphasis on direct experiences through interactive activities and on communicating product benefits that address consumers' real needs. Accordingly, the value of a product is no longer determined solely by its quality but also by the experiences consumers gain throughout their interactions with the brand. These findings are consistent with the study by [Author], which reported that consumer experience significantly contributes to the development of emotional attachment to a brand. Likewise, Mostafa and Kasamani (2020) argued that experience-oriented marketing approaches are more effective in fostering consumer loyalty than product-centered promotional strategies.

The marketing messages also indicate that trust has become an increasingly important determinant of effective marketing communication. The preference for micro-influencers, organic content, and recommendations from digital communities suggests that Generation Z places greater emphasis on the credibility of information sources than on popularity alone. Moreover, the use of relevant nostalgia demonstrates that marketing communication should reflect cultural and social experiences that genuinely resonate with consumers' everyday lives. These findings are supported by Khwaja et al. (2020), who found that trust established through digital interactions exerts a substantial influence on consumer decision-making. Similarly, Theocharis et al. (2025) demonstrated that recommendations from digital communities and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) exert a stronger influence on Generation Z's purchasing decisions than conventional advertising.

Consumer Behavior Shift in the Digital Marketing Ecosystem

Changes in consumer behavior in the digital era can no longer be explained solely by the evolution of communication media or technological advancement but must also be understood through the ways consumers perceive experiences, establish trust, and interact with brands. The analysis of the six marketing messages contained in the Instagram post reveals that the marketing mistakes commonly directed toward Generation Z share a common pattern, namely their continued reliance on

conventional marketing approaches. In contrast, the messages implicitly reveal three key dimensions shaping Generation Z consumer behavior: experience, behavioral segmentation, and authentic trust. These dimensions do not operate independently; rather, they interact dynamically to produce a consumer behavior shift within the digital marketing ecosystem, as illustrated in Figure 1.

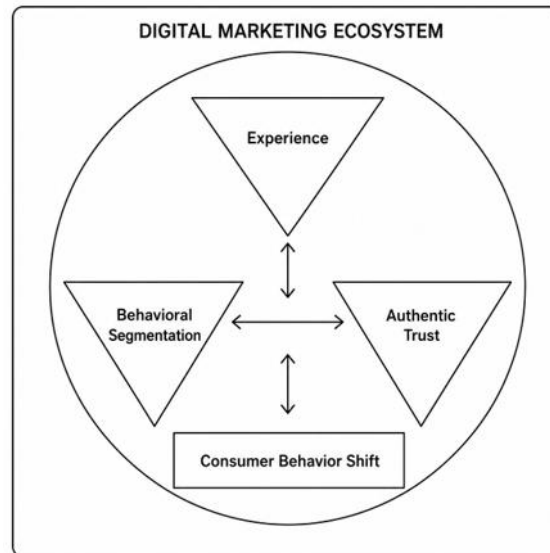


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Consumer Behavior Shift in the Digital Marketing Ecosystem

Source: Developed by the authors based on the content analysis of the Instagram post "6 Kesalahan Brand Saat Marketing ke Anak Muda di 2026".

The first dimension identified through the analysis is *experience*. This dimension is reflected in the first marketing message, which emphasizes that maintaining a digital presence alone is no longer sufficient and that brands must create direct experiences through event activations, pop-up experiences, and other interactive activities. The fifth message further reinforces this perspective by highlighting that Generation Z is more interested in products capable of solving real-life problems than in products promoted solely through claims of superior quality. Together, these messages demonstrate that experience has evolved from being a complementary marketing element into a core value sought by consumers. This finding suggests that digitalization has not diminished the need for face-to-face interaction; instead, it has increased the value of physical experiences as a means of validating information previously obtained through digital media. These findings support the argument of Jiang et al. (2018), who demonstrated that consumer experience plays a crucial role in shaping perceived brand value. A similar perspective was presented by Japutra et al. (2018), who argued that meaningful experiences strengthen emotional attachment and enhance consumer loyalty toward brands.

The second dimension is *behavioral segmentation*. The second marketing message indicates that one of the most fundamental mistakes in marketing to Generation Z is treating this generation as a homogeneous consumer segment based solely on age.

Instead, the content emphasizes that Generation Z exhibits considerable diversity in terms of interests, lifestyles, digital platform preferences, and communication patterns. These findings indicate that market segmentation boundaries are no longer defined primarily by demographic characteristics but by behavioral patterns developed through consumers' everyday digital activities. This interpretation suggests that Generation Z consumer identity is dynamic and context-dependent, requiring segmentation strategies to evolve alongside behavioral changes rather than relying on static demographic attributes. This perspective is supported by Ramya et al. (2025), who found that behavior-based segmentation produces marketing strategies that are more adaptive to changing consumer preferences. Furthermore, these findings extend the work of Tolstikova et al. (2021) by demonstrating that digital behavior provides a more representative indicator than age for understanding the characteristics of Generation Z consumers.

The third dimension identified is *authentic trust*. The third marketing message illustrates that Generation Z places greater trust in micro-influencers than in celebrities with large numbers of followers, while the sixth message demonstrates that organic content and recommendations from other users are considered more trustworthy than conventional advertising. Together, these messages indicate a fundamental shift in the sources of consumer trust. The findings suggest that the legitimacy of information is no longer determined by the popularity of the communicator but by perceptions of authenticity, shared experiences, and contextual similarity between the information source and consumers. This argument is supported by Pöyry et al. (2019), who found that source authenticity exerts a stronger influence on purchasing decisions than communicator popularity. Likewise, Filieri et al. (2025) reported that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and digital communities have become the primary sources of reference shaping Generation Z consumer trust.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the relationship between *experience* and *behavioral segmentation* demonstrates that these two dimensions reinforce one another. Consumer experiences generate valuable insights into preferences, habits, and interaction patterns, enabling companies to develop more accurate behavioral segmentation. Conversely, behavior-based segmentation allows firms to design more personalized experiences tailored to the characteristics of different consumer groups. Therefore, experience should be viewed not only as an outcome of marketing strategies but also as a continuous source of information that enriches behavioral segmentation. This reciprocal relationship is consistent with the findings of Zhang and Chang (2021), who argued that consumer experience serves as a fundamental basis for understanding the dynamics of market behavior. Similarly, Matz et al. (2024) demonstrated that personalized experiences become substantially more effective when developed through behavioral segmentation rather than demographic segmentation.

The interaction between *behavioral segmentation* and *authentic trust* indicates that these dimensions evolve simultaneously. A deeper understanding of consumer behavior enables companies to deliver more relevant marketing communication, thereby strengthening consumer trust. At the same time, increased trust encourages consumers to generate more interactions, recommendations, and feedback, further enriching companies' understanding of consumer behavior. These findings suggest that trust is not merely an outcome of effective segmentation but also serves as a mechanism through which firms continuously refine their understanding of consumer behavior. This interpretation is supported by Rahmawaty et al. (2024), who demonstrated that personalized communication significantly enhances consumer trust in brands. Likewise, Glaveli (2021) found that long-term relationships between companies and consumers are established through the integration of behavioral understanding and trust-building efforts.

The relationship between *experience* and *authentic trust* represents another reciprocal interaction. Positive experiences gained through brand interactions foster consumer trust, while established trust encourages consumers to seek similar experiences through repeat purchases, participation in brand communities, and recommendations to other users. Together, these interactions form a reinforcing cycle that increases the likelihood of developing long-term consumer loyalty. This interpretation suggests that experience and trust should not be viewed as independent factors but rather as interconnected mechanisms that continuously strengthen consumer engagement with brands. These findings are consistent with Kong et al. (2020), who identified positive consumer experience as one of the primary antecedents of consumer trust. Similarly, Guerreiro and Pacheco (2021) explained that consumers with higher levels of trust are more likely to demonstrate loyalty, active engagement, and a stronger willingness to recommend brands to others.

Overall, the findings indicate that the consumer behavior shift observed among Generation Z is not driven by a single factor but rather emerges from the dynamic interaction among *experience*, *behavioral segmentation*, and *authentic trust* within the digital marketing ecosystem. These three dimensions form an interconnected system in which changes in one dimension influence the others. The proposed conceptual model suggests that effective marketing strategies should no longer focus solely on products or promotional media but instead emphasize creating meaningful experiences, understanding consumer behavior adaptively, and building authentic trust. These findings not only support the conclusions of Grishaeva et al. (2022) regarding shifts in digital consumer behavior but also propose a conceptual framework that explains the reciprocal relationships among the three dimensions shaping Generation Z consumer behavior. Consequently, the proposed model contributes theoretically by integrating these three key dimensions into a unified consumer behavior ecosystem while offering practical implications for companies

seeking to develop marketing strategies that are more adaptive to the characteristics of Generation Z consumers.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Generation Z consumer behavior within the digital marketing ecosystem has undergone a significant shift characterized by the interaction of three key dimensions: *experience*, *behavioral segmentation*, and *authentic trust*. These findings indicate that Generation Z's purchasing decisions are no longer predominantly driven by conventional marketing approaches centered on product promotion, demographic segmentation, or communicator popularity. Instead, meaningful experiences, an in-depth understanding of consumers' digital behavior, and trust established through authenticity have emerged as the primary mechanisms shaping consumption behavior. These three dimensions interact dynamically, resulting in consumer behavior that is increasingly adaptive to the characteristics of the digital environment. Consequently, the effectiveness of marketing strategies is no longer determined by the extent of promotional exposure but by a brand's ability to create relevant experiences, implement behavior-based segmentation, and build relationships founded on authentic trust.

This study contributes theoretically by developing the conceptual model *Consumer Behavior Shift in the Digital Marketing Ecosystem*, which integrates the dimensions of *experience*, *behavioral segmentation*, and *authentic trust* into a unified analytical framework derived from qualitative content analysis. The proposed model extends the consumer behavior literature by demonstrating that these dimensions do not operate independently but rather function as an interconnected system shaping Generation Z's consumer decision-making process. From a practical perspective, the findings provide valuable guidance for companies seeking to design marketing strategies that are more adaptive to the characteristics of digital consumers. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its reliance on a single Instagram post as the primary data source, which may not fully represent digital marketing practices across different social media platforms or industry contexts. Therefore, future research is encouraged to expand the range of data sources by incorporating multiple social media platforms, diverse types of marketing content, or combining qualitative content analysis with interviews or survey methods to further validate and refine the proposed conceptual model.

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