

From Scroll to Checkout: Generation Z's Lived Experiences with TikTok Content Marketing

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ABSTRACT

TikTok has transformed digital marketing by enabling interactive and personalized consumer–brand engagement. Although previous studies have linked content marketing, brand awareness, social proof, and purchase decisions, little is known about how Generation Z experiences these processes. This study explores Generation Z's lived experiences of TikTok content marketing using an interpretative phenomenological approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 Generation Z consumers, and the data were analyzed using the Gioia methodology. The findings identify a sequential consumer experiential journey comprising TikTok Content Marketing Types, Formation of Brand Awareness, Social Proof as a Trust Builder, The Purchase Decision Process, and Reflection of Consumer Experience among Generation Z. Authentic content stimulates initial engagement, repeated algorithm-driven exposure enhances brand awareness, social proof strengthens trust, and purchase decisions result from rational evaluations supported by community validation. Repeated interactions also foster digital reflexivity, encouraging consumers to critically evaluate marketing information before purchasing. This study contributes to digital marketing literature by proposing a phenomenological model explaining how TikTok content experiences shape Generation Z's purchasing behavior within the social commerce ecosystem.

Keyword: Tiktok Content Marketing, Generation Z, Consumer Experiential Journey, Social Proof, Purchase Decision.

ABSTRAK

TikTok mentransformasi pemasaran digital yang memungkinkan interaksi interaktif dan personal antara konsumen dan merek. Meskipun penelitian sebelumnya telah menghubungkan *content marketing*, *brand awareness*, *social proof*, dan keputusan pembelian, masih sedikit penelitian yang menjelaskan bagaimana Generasi Z mengalami proses tersebut. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi pengalaman hidup Generasi Z terhadap *content marketing* di TikTok menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi interpretatif. Wawancara semi-terstruktur dilakukan terhadap 20 konsumen Generasi Z, yang kemudian dianalisis menggunakan metodologi Gioia. Temuan penelitian berhasil mengidentifikasi perjalanan pengalaman konsumen yang terdiri atas jenis *content marketing*, pembentukan *brand awareness*, *social proof* sebagai pembangun kepercayaan, proses keputusan pembelian, dan refleksi pengalaman konsumen Generasi Z. Konten yang autentik mendorong keterlibatan awal, paparan berulang yang didukung algoritma meningkatkan *brand awareness*, *social proof* memperkuat kepercayaan, dan keputusan pembelian dihasilkan melalui evaluasi rasional yang didukung validasi komunitas. Interaksi yang berulang juga mendorong refleksivitas digital sehingga konsumen lebih kritis dalam mengevaluasi informasi pemasaran sebelum melakukan pembelian. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada literatur pemasaran digital dengan mengusulkan model fenomenologis yang menjelaskan bagaimana pengalaman terhadap *content marketing* di TikTok membentuk perilaku pembelian Generasi Z dalam ekosistem *social commerce*.

Keyword: Konten Pemasaran TikTok, Generasi Z, Perjalanan Pengalaman Konsumen, *Social Proof*, Keputusan Pembelian.



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1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the marketing communication paradigm, shifting from a promotion-oriented approach to a value-driven strategy centred on content. Social media platforms facilitate more interactive relationships between firms and consumers by delivering informative, relevant, and engaging content, which enhances customer engagement, brand awareness, and purchasing decisions (Chen and Lin, 2019; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021). As result, the effectiveness of digital marketing now depends on the capacity of content to create meaningful consumer experiences rather than simply disseminating promotional messages.

TikTok has emerged as one of the most influential social media platforms shaping consumer behaviour, particularly among Generation Z. Its For You Page (FYP) algorithm delivers personalised content based on user preferences, increasing repeated brand exposure and accelerating product discovery. These characteristics position TikTok as both an entertainment platform and a significant source of product information, brand evaluation, and purchase decision-making (Ying *et al.*, 2025).

In line with these developments, Generation Z increasingly relies on social media as the primary source of information before making purchase decisions. Prior research demonstrates that social media marketing positively influences customer engagement, brand awareness, brand equity, brand trust, and purchase intention (Moslehpour *et al.*, 2022; Osei-Frimpong *et al.*, 2022; Vo Minh, Nguyen Huong and Dang Nguyen Ha, 2022; Salhab *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, authentic and engaging content enhances consumer involvement and strengthens relationships between brands and consumers (Yang *et al.*, 2024; Ismael *et al.*, 2025). Within the TikTok ecosystem, short-form videos featuring storytelling and authentic product experiences effectively capture Generation Z's attention and stimulate engagement (Ying *et al.*, 2025). Among social media marketing strategies, content marketing is the primary mechanism through which consumers initially encounter and interact with brands on TikTok.

In addition to attracting users' attention, content marketing serves as the initial cognitive stimulus through which consumers become familiar with a brand. Authentic, informative, and engaging content delivered repeatedly via TikTok's algorithm increases exposure to brand-related information, facilitating brand recognition and recall. Previous studies argue that digital content marketing strengthens brand awareness by fostering meaningful interactions and reinforcing consumers' cognitive associations with brands (Chen and Lin, 2019; Hollebeek and Macky, 2019; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021). Thus, on TikTok, content marketing operates not only as a promotional tool but also as the first experiential trigger in the consumer journey.

However, brand awareness alone does not guarantee consumer trust or immediate purchasing decisions. As consumers become familiar with a brand, they seek additional information to reduce uncertainty before making a purchase. On TikTok, this evaluative process is primarily facilitated through user-generated content, reviews, comments, and recommendations from other consumers. Social proof enables consumers to validate marketing claims through collective user experiences, thereby transforming initial brand awareness into trust (Salhab *et al.*, 2023; Rosillo-Díaz, Muñoz-Rosas and Blanco-Encomienda, 2024; Yang *et al.*, 2024).

Social proof plays a critical role in translating trust into purchasing behaviour. Instead of relying solely on firm-generated promotional messages, consumers increasingly evaluate products through reviews, ratings, comments, and shared experiences from other users. These collective evaluations reduce perceived uncertainty, strengthen confidence in product quality and seller credibility, and ultimately facilitate purchasing decisions within social commerce environments (Vidyanata, 2022; Salhab *et al.*, 2023; Kaiwa, Yuliati and Nurhayat, 2024; Rosillo-Díaz, Muñoz-Rosas and Blanco-Encomienda, 2024).

Furthermore, consumer experiences do not necessarily conclude after a purchase. Repeated interactions with digital content and post-purchase evaluations encourage consumers to reflect on the credibility of marketing messages and the quality of their purchasing decisions. This reflection gradually enhances consumers' ability to evaluate future marketing information more critically, resulting in increasingly informed and selective purchasing decisions (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021). Consumer reflection should therefore be viewed as a continuation of the experiential journey rather than the endpoint of a single purchase episode.

Despite these advances, existing research remains limited in providing a holistic explanation of this journey. Previous studies primarily examine content marketing, brand awareness, social proof, and purchase decisions as independent constructs using quantitative, variable-based approaches, which offer limited insight into consumers' lived experiences and treat TikTok as a collection of isolated marketing elements rather than as an integrated social commerce ecosystem. To address these theoretical, methodological, and contextual limitations, this study employs interpretative phenomenological analysis and the Gioia methodology to explore how Generation Z constructs meaning from TikTok content marketing. The principal contribution is the development of the phenomenological consumer experiential journey model, which conceptualises purchasing

behaviour as a sequential experiential process linking content engagement, brand awareness, social proof, purchase decisions, and consumer reflection. This approach extends digital marketing literature beyond conventional variable-based explanations toward a process-oriented understanding of consumer behaviour.

2. Methods

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to examine how Generation Z constructs meaning from their lived experiences with TikTok content marketing and how these experiences influence brand awareness, community-based trust, and purchasing decisions. IPA is particularly suitable for this research as it aims to understand how individuals interpret and make sense of significant everyday experiences, recognising that meaning is co-constructed through participant-researcher interaction (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Rather than testing predetermined causal relationships, this approach enables an in-depth exploration of the experiential processes by which consumers engage with digital marketing in TikTok's social commerce ecosystem.

To enhance analytical transparency and support theory development, the Gioia methodology (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013) was integrated into the research design. While IPA guided the exploration and interpretation of participants' lived experiences, the Gioia methodology offered a systematic inductive framework for transforming these experiences into theoretically meaningful concepts, including first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions. The combination of these approaches preserved participants' voices while facilitating the development of a theoretically grounded explanation of the phenomenological consumer experiential journey model.

2.1 Participants and Data Saturation

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure inclusion of individuals with direct experience purchasing products following exposure to TikTok content marketing. Eligibility criteria included: (1) belonging to Generation Z (18–27 years old), (2) active TikTok usage, (3) exposure to TikTok marketing content, (4) having purchased at least one product after viewing TikTok content, and (5) willingness to participate in an in-depth interview. This sample size is consistent with interpretative phenomenological research, which prioritises depth and richness of experiential understanding over statistical representativeness (Smith et al., 2009).

Table 1. Presents The Demographic Characteristics of The Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Daily TikTok Usage	Products Purchased Through TikTok
Djeny	Female	20	University Student	8 hours	Skincare
Rizqi	Male	19	University Student	4–5 hours	Skincare
Tiara	Female	21	University Student	8 hours	Makeup/Skincare
Afif	Male	20	University Student	2–3 hours	Perfume
Zalifa	Female	20	University Student	8 hours	Skincare and Clothing
Fifilia	Female	21	University Student	12 hours	Makeup/Skincare
Natasha	Female	19	University Student	4–6 hours	Skincare and Clothing
Achbar	Male	20	University Student	5 hours	Perfume
Shelia	Female	24	University Student	2–5 hours	Clothing
Amelia	Female	20	University Student	5 hours	Skincare and Makeup
Nadia	Female	25	Entrepreneur	5–7 hours	Body Care, Skincare, and Beauty Products
Alya	Female	26	Private Employee	2–3 hours	Flat Shoes, Outfits, and Bedroom Accessories

Fajar	Male	27	Marketing Professional	5–6 hours	Outdoor Equipment
Raka	Male	21	University Student	3–4 hours	Jeans and Outfits
Anisa	Female	20	University Student	3 hours	Books and Skincare
Nabila	Female	22	University Student	4–5 hours	Tumbler
Salsa	Female	21	University Student	4–5 hours	Skincare
Dimas	Male	21	University Student	1–2 hours	Keychains and Shoe Brushes
Arga	Male	22	University Student	1–2 hours	Running Pants
Bagas	Male	27	Private Employee	30 minutes–1 hour	Shoes and Sports Equipment

Data collection proceeded until conceptual saturation was achieved (Saunders et al., 2018; Guest, Namey and Chen, 2020). Saturation was assessed continuously by comparing each successive interview with the evolving coding structure. Initial saturation was observed after the eighteenth interview, when no new first-order concepts emerged. Two additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of the analytical framework. These interviews did not yield further first-order concepts, second-order themes, or aggregate dimensions, indicating that the conceptual structure was sufficiently comprehensive to explain participants' lived experiences.

2.2 Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted between June and July 2026. The interview guide was designed to encourage participants to narrate their experiences freely and to enable the interviewer to probe emerging issues in greater depth (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). The interviews explored four broad topics: (1) experiences of encountering TikTok content marketing, (2) the development of brand awareness, (3) trust formation through community-based social proof, and (4) purchase decision-making and post-purchase reflection. Additional probing questions were used whenever participants introduced experiences that required further clarification.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim immediately after data collection. Transcripts were reviewed repeatedly alongside field notes to ensure familiarity with each participant's narrative before formal analysis.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative process integrating Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and the Gioia methodology. In accordance with IPA, each interview transcript was initially analysed idiographically, allowing the researchers to understand each participant's unique lived experience before making cross-participant comparisons (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). During this stage, repeated readings and interpretative memo writing were conducted to identify how participants understood and assigned meaning to their experiences with TikTok content marketing.

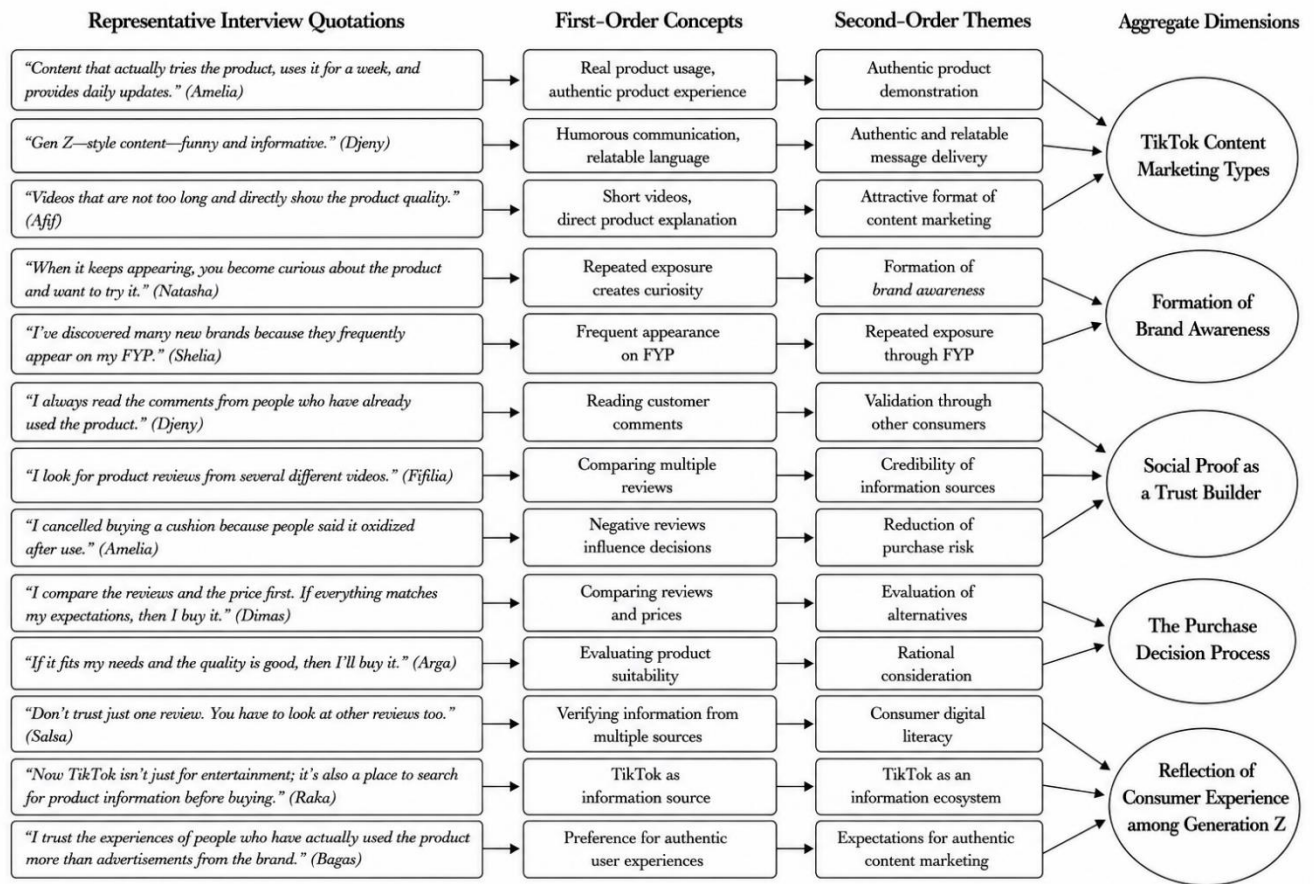
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Subsequently, the analysis followed the Gioia methodology (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013). Participants' own expressions were initially retained as first-order concepts to preserve their perspectives. These concepts were then interpreted and synthesised into second-order themes, reflecting shared experiential meanings across participants. Finally, related themes were integrated into aggregate dimensions, which collectively explained the sequential experiential process underlying the proposed model.

A constant comparative strategy was employed throughout the analysis to compare emerging concepts across interviews. Coding decisions were iteratively refined through repeated examination of transcripts,

analytical memos, and collaborative discussions among the research team until conceptual agreement was reached. This iterative process ensured that the resulting theoretical model remained grounded in participants' lived experiences.

Figure 1. Representative Example of the Gioia Coding Process



To enhance analytical transparency, Figure 1. presents representative examples of the coding process, illustrating how participants' quotations were transformed into first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions.

2.4 Reflexivity

Recognising the centrality of interpretation in IPA, the researchers adopted a process of reflexive engagement throughout the study rather than attempting complete bracketing. Before formal analysis, each researcher documented assumptions regarding TikTok marketing, digital consumer behaviour, and social commerce in reflexive journals. These journals were revisited during data analysis to critically assess whether emerging interpretations reflected participants' lived experiences or researchers' prior expectations. Interpretations were continually challenged through regular analytical discussions among the research team. When alternative interpretations emerged, the researchers returned to the original interview transcripts and supporting quotations until consensus was achieved. This ongoing reflexive process reduced individual researcher bias and ensured that theoretical interpretations remained closely connected to participants' narratives.

2.5 Trustworthiness

The study's rigour was established using the trustworthiness framework proposed by (Guba S, 1982), which includes credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with the data, verbatim transcription, member checking of preliminary interpretations, and peer debriefing with qualitative researchers to validate interpretations and minimise researcher bias. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail documenting participant recruitment, interview protocols, coding logs, analytical memos, reflexive journals, coding revisions, and analytical decisions throughout the research process. Confirmability was achieved by

preserving a transparent chain of evidence linking interview transcripts, field notes, reflexive journals, first-order concepts, second-order themes, aggregate dimensions, and final theoretical interpretations, ensuring that findings were grounded in participants' narratives rather than researchers' assumptions. Transferability was enhanced through detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, interview excerpts, and analytical interpretations, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to comparable Generation Z populations and similar social commerce environments.

3. Findings

Figure 1 presents the Gioia data structure, illustrating the inductive development of five interconnected dimensions that explain how Generation Z experiences TikTok content marketing, from initial engagement to purchase decisions and subsequent consumer reflection.

TikTok Content Marketing Types

The interview findings revealed that the Generation Z participants shared relatively consistent preferences regarding the characteristics of effective content marketing on TikTok. Participants emphasized that engaging content extends beyond merely presenting a product; instead, it integrates entertainment, visually appealing presentations, concise video durations, storytelling, and authentic product demonstrations. Conversely, content perceived as overly formal, excessively lengthy, or dominated by hard-selling techniques was generally ignored because it did not align with the communication preferences of Generation Z.

Amelia explained that authentic product usage experiences constitute one of the most influential elements when evaluating marketing content.

"Content that actually tries the product, uses it for a week, and provides daily updates." (Amelia)

Similarly, Djeny highlighted the importance of content that reflects the communication style of Gen Z:

"Gen Z-style content—funny and informative." (Djeny).

Beyond entertainment value, participants considered visual presentation a critical factor in attracting attention. Afif stated that concise videos demonstrating product quality directly were more persuasive than lengthy promotional content.

"Videos that are not too long and directly show the product quality." (Afif)

Rizqi expressed a similar preference, emphasizing that informative rather than promotional content increases credibility:

"I prefer videos that explain the product directly so we can see its function and quality without too much promotion." (Rizqi)

Tiara argued that storytelling creates a more authentic and relatable presentation of products, making consumers more interested in exploring them further:

"When there is a story or personal experience of using the product, I become more interested because it feels more real." (Tiara)

Participants also expressed clear resistance to content resembling conventional advertising. As Djeny noted:

"Content that is too long and doesn't get straight to the point." (Djeny)

Collectively, these findings indicate that the effectiveness of TikTok content marketing is determined not only by the product being promoted but also by the manner in which the marketing message is communicated. Generation Z perceives authentic product demonstrations, storytelling, visually engaging presentations, and informal communication styles as important indicators of content credibility. These characteristics stimulate initial consumer engagement and encourage users to seek additional information about the featured products. In contrast, highly promotional, overly formal, or entertainment-deficient content receives limited attention because it conflicts with the communication expectations of Gen Z.

From a phenomenological perspective, participants did not perceive content marketing as a promotional activity but as an experiential interaction through which they assessed the authenticity and trustworthiness of both the content creator and the promoted brand. The combination of authenticity, entertainment, and practical product information forms the initial experiential gateway that shapes subsequent cognitive evaluations. Accordingly, the characteristics of TikTok content marketing represent the entry point of the consumer

experience, initiating a sequential process that ultimately contributes to the development of brand awareness, social proof, and purchase decision-making.

Brand Awareness Formation

The interview findings indicate that brand awareness among Generation Z is primarily developed through repeated exposure to content marketing on TikTok's For You Page (FYP). Participants explained that TikTok's recommendation algorithm repeatedly presents the same brands across their feeds, enabling them to recognize, remember, and gradually become familiar with products they had not previously encountered. Continuous exposure fostered brand familiarity while simultaneously stimulating curiosity to seek additional information about the products.

Achbar described how repeated exposure and numerous user reviews introduced him to a skincare brand that he had not previously considered:

"Barber Daily facial wash because it kept appearing on my FYP, and there were many reviews about it." (Achbar)

He further explained that repeated encounters with a brand made it easier to recall when he needed products in the same category:

"When I need a product and don't know which brand to choose, I just search again for the products that I've previously seen on TikTok." (Achbar)

Natasha shared a similar experience, emphasizing that repeated content exposure gradually transformed curiosity into brand recognition:

"When it keeps appearing, you become curious about the product and want to try it." (Natasha)

She also noted that brand recall was influenced not only by the frequency of exposure but also by a distinctive visual identity:

"Because of the packaging and the way they promote the product." (Natasha)

Shelia explained that TikTok had become her primary source for discovering emerging brands, particularly when searching for trending products:

"I have discovered many new brands because they frequently appear on my FYP. Initially, I was unfamiliar with them, but over time, I began to recognize the brands." (Shelia)

Likewise, Anisa emphasized that repeated exposure to TikTok content generated stronger brand recall than conventional advertising on other platforms:

"If a brand keeps appearing on TikTok, it is much easier to remember. When I need that type of product, that brand is usually the first one that comes to mind." (Anisa)

These findings demonstrate that brand awareness on TikTok emerges through a process of repeated exposure, facilitated by the platform's recommendation algorithm. Frequent encounters with content marketing enable Gen Z consumers to recognize brands, strengthen memory retention, and develop initial brand associations. However, participants consistently indicated that brand awareness alone was insufficient to trigger their purchase decisions. Instead, increased familiarity encourages consumers to search for additional product information, compare competing alternatives, and evaluate other consumers' experiences before making purchasing decisions.

From an experiential perspective, repeated exposure represents more than simple advertising frequency; it constitutes an experiential process through which brands gradually become embedded in consumers' everyday digital lives. Participants described brand awareness as an evolving cognitive state resulting from continuous interaction with algorithmically curated content rather than deliberate promotional efforts alone. Consequently, brand awareness functions as the second stage of the consumer experiential journey, transforming initial engagement with TikTok content into cognitive familiarity and preparing consumers to seek further validation through social proof before converting awareness into actual purchase behavior.

Social Proof as a Trust-Building Mechanism

The interview findings demonstrate that social proof plays a pivotal role in shaping Generation Z's trust in products promoted on TikTok. Across all participants, there was a consistent pattern indicating that they did

not immediately accept the information presented through content marketing. Instead, they actively verified product claims by examining user comments, customer reviews, ratings, testimonials, and experiences shared by content creators whom they considered credible. Consequently, purchase decisions were influenced not only by promotional content but also by the collective experiences of the broader TikTok community.

Amelia explained that customer reviews and product ratings are the primary basis for evaluating a product before purchasing it:

"Because of the reviews and ratings of a product." (Amelia)

Similarly, Djeny emphasized that reading user comments had become an essential verification process before trusting a product recommendation:

"I always read the comments from people who have already used the product." (Djeny)

Rather than relying on a single source of information, the participants described a systematic process of comparing multiple reviews to obtain a more balanced assessment. Fifilia explained:

"I look for product reviews from several different videos." (Fifilia)

Afif echoed this perspective, emphasizing that confidence in purchasing only emerged after multiple trust indicators were aligned:

"First, I look for reviews, comments, and ratings. Only then do I feel confident." (Afif)

Beyond user-generated reviews, participants considered influencers to be important information sources. However, their trust in influencers varied considerably depending on the perceived authenticity of the product evaluation process. Djeny explained that she trusted creators who genuinely tested products before recommending them.

"Some influencers actually use the product for a week before reviewing it." (Djeny)

Conversely, several participants expressed skepticism toward commercial sponsorship endorsements. Amelia stated:

"I don't really trust influencers because they're paid." (Amelia)

Likewise, Fifilia distinguished between independent creators and official brand accounts, arguing that authentic experiences are more persuasive than corporate promotional content.

"Official accounts usually make everything look perfect, whereas non-sponsored influencers tend to be more honest." (Fifilia)

The findings further reveal that social proof functions as a mechanism for reducing perceived purchase risks. Nearly all participants reported having cancelled intended purchases after encountering negative reviews from previous consumers. Amelia recalled:

"Yes, I cancelled buying a cushion because people said it oxidized after use." (Amelia)

Afif shared a similar experience.

"I decided not to buy the shoes because many people said they wore out quickly." (Afif)

Several participants further indicated that negative comments often carried greater persuasive power than promotional videos appearing on their FYP because they were perceived to reflect genuine consumer experiences rather than marketing messages. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that social proof serves as the primary trust-validation mechanism in Generation Z's digital purchasing journey. After initial exposure to content marketing and the development of brand awareness, participants consistently sought confirmation from user-generated content before making purchase decisions. Therefore, trust was constructed not only through firm-generated communication but also through the collective experiences shared within the digital community. Moreover, participants' critical evaluation of influencers suggests that credibility, authenticity, transparency, and experiential evidence are the fundamental determinants of trustworthiness. From an experiential perspective, social proof represents the third stage of the consumer experiential journey, transforming cognitive brand awareness into psychological trust while simultaneously reducing perceived uncertainty and the risk of purchase. This validation process ultimately prepares consumers to convert their trust into actual purchasing behavior.

The Purchase Decision Process

The interview findings indicate that Generation Z's purchase decisions on TikTok are the outcome of a deliberate and sequential evaluation process rather than an instantaneous response to marketing stimuli. Although content marketing effectively captures consumers' attention and stimulates initial interest, participants consistently reported that they carefully evaluated multiple factors—including product price, quality, user reviews, seller credibility, and the suitability of the product to their personal needs—before making a purchase. Consequently, purchase decisions are primarily driven by rational evaluations rather than impulsive buying behaviors.

Zalifa explained that comparing multiple alternatives is an essential step before deciding to purchase a product.

"I check the reviews first, compare different products, and compare prices across different stores." (Zalifa)

Similarly, Afif emphasized that verifying both the credibility of the seller and the quality of the product is indispensable before completing a transaction:

"I look for the official store, check the store ratings, and evaluate the product quality." (Afif)

Achbar described how repeated exposure to content on TikTok initially sparked curiosity about a product. Nevertheless, curiosity alone was insufficient to motivate an immediate purchase.

"Because I became really curious and wanted to try it." (Achbar)

Dimas likewise explained that purchasing decisions were made only after gathering and evaluating information from multiple sources:

"I usually compare the reviews and the price first. If everything matches my expectations, I buy it." (Dimas)

Meanwhile, Arga stressed that product utility consistently outweighed temporary social trends when making purchasing decisions:

"If it fits my needs and the quality is good, then I will buy it. If it is only viral, I usually think twice." (Arga)

Although most participants described a predominantly rational evaluation process, several acknowledged that the viral nature of TikTok content could evoke emotional responses, particularly curiosity and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). However, these emotional triggers primarily serve as catalysts for initial product interest rather than determinants of the final purchasing decision. Participants consistently indicated that the ultimate decision depended on whether the accumulated information met their personal evaluation criteria.

Overall, these findings suggest that Generation Z's purchase decision-making process reflects the interaction between emotional stimulation and rational evaluation. Viral content, algorithmic exposure, and curiosity function as the initial drivers that attract consumers' attention, whereas purchase decisions are ultimately determined through systematic assessments of product quality, pricing, user-generated reviews, seller credibility, and personal relevance. Rather than serving merely as a social media platform for entertainment, TikTok functions as a comprehensive information-search ecosystem that supports consumers throughout the decision-making process.

From an experiential perspective, purchase decision-making represents the culmination of the consumer's experiential journey. Participants described purchasing not as an impulsive reaction to persuasive content but as the outcome of an iterative process that began with engaging content marketing, progressed through brand awareness, was reinforced by social proof, and concluded with a reasoned evaluation of the available alternatives. This sequential process highlights that Generation Z consumers actively integrate cognitive judgments and emotional responses before translating digital engagement into actual purchase behavior.

Reflection on the Consumer Experience

The interview findings reveal that participants' experiences of interacting with content marketing on TikTok extended beyond influencing purchase decisions; they also fundamentally shaped how Generation Z evaluates digital information. Participants consistently reported becoming more critical, selective, and cautious in interpreting marketing messages. Rather than relying on a single source of information, they have developed the habit of verifying product claims through multiple sources, including user comments, customer reviews, ratings, and the experiences of other consumers. These behavioral changes stem from previous encounters with promotional content that did not accurately reflect actual product performance.

Nadia explained that her experiences with TikTok made her more cautious when evaluating product information:

"When I want to buy a product, I look at several reviews first—not just one person's opinion—so I can be more confident." (Nadia)

Similarly, Salsa emphasized the importance of comparing multiple reviews before making a purchasing decision:

"Do not trust just one review. You have to look at other reviews too, so you know whether the product is actually good." (Salsa)

Raka described how TikTok evolved from an entertainment platform into an essential source of product information:

"Now TikTok isn't just for entertainment; it's also a place to search for product information before buying." (Raka)

Natasha also demonstrated a more critical attitude toward content creators, emphasizing the need for skepticism when consuming promotional content.

"Don't easily trust content creators." (Natasha)

Likewise, Bagas explained that authentic user experiences had become considerably more persuasive than brand-generated advertising:

"I trust the experiences of people who have actually used the product more than advertisements from the brand." (Bagas)

Beyond seeking comprehensive information, participants consistently expressed strong expectations for honesty and authenticity in content marketing. They perceived content that openly presented both the strengths and limitations of a product, supported by genuine user experiences, as substantially more trustworthy than promotional content focusing exclusively on positive product attributes. Therefore, authenticity is regarded not merely as a desirable characteristic of content but as a fundamental prerequisite for establishing consumer trust.

Overall, these findings indicate that reflection on consumer experience is characterized by the development of digital literacy and critical evaluation abilities. Repeated interactions with content marketing encouraged participants to move beyond passive information consumption and adopt a more systematic verification process by comparing multiple reviews, comments, and user experiences before making a purchase decision. From an experiential perspective, participants no longer viewed themselves as mere recipients of marketing communication; instead, they assumed the role of active evaluators who continuously assessed the credibility of content, creators, user-generated information, and brands within the TikTok ecosystem.

This final stage of the consumer experiential journey demonstrates that repeated digital interactions reshape not only purchasing behavior but also consumers' cognitive evaluation processes. Through accumulated experience, Generation Z develops greater skepticism toward persuasive marketing messages, places increasing value on authenticity and transparency, and integrates critical thinking into their subsequent purchase decisions. Consequently, consumer experience extends beyond a single transaction and evolves into a continuous learning process that influences future information processing and marketplace behavior.

4. Discussion

Authentic Content Engagement

This study demonstrates that Generation Z's initial engagement with TikTok content marketing is primarily driven by perceived content authenticity. Participants evaluated not only the promoted product but also how it was communicated through authentic product demonstrations, storytelling, visually appealing presentations, and communication styles that reflected Generation Z's digital culture. This finding supports previous studies suggesting that authentic content strengthens consumer engagement by fostering emotional connection, trust, and perceived credibility (Diwanji, 2026; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

The findings further indicate that the effectiveness of content marketing depends on its relevance, credibility, and ability to create meaningful consumer experiences, rather than on promotional intensity alone (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Within TikTok, these experiences are created through

realistic product demonstrations, natural storytelling, and engaging visual content that encourages consumers to perceive marketing messages as informative rather than persuasive (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Schmitt, 1999).

Moreover, participants consistently preferred creative, informative, and platform-oriented content over conventional advertising. This finding aligns with previous research showing that entertaining and informative social media content significantly enhances consumer engagement and brand interaction (Chen & Lin, 2019; Moslehpour et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2025). In contrast, hard-selling content was perceived as less credible and was frequently ignored, supporting earlier evidence that consumers increasingly favor transparent, authentic, and experience-based communication over overt promotional appeals (Audrezet et al., 2020; Salhab et al., 2023).

Overall, the findings suggest that authentic content engagement represents the first stage of the consumer experiential journey on TikTok. Consumers initially evaluate the authenticity of content before becoming cognitively and emotionally engaged. This authentic engagement subsequently facilitates the development of brand awareness, strengthens trust through social proof, and ultimately contributes to purchase decision-making, extending existing social media marketing literature by positioning authenticity as the experiential mechanism underlying consumer engagement and subsequent purchasing behavior.

Algorithm-Driven Brand Awareness

This study demonstrates that Generation Z's brand awareness on TikTok is primarily shaped through algorithm-driven repeated exposure. The *For You Page* (FYP) algorithm continuously presents relevant content, enabling consumers to recognize, remember, and become familiar with brands that were previously unknown. This finding supports previous studies showing that repeated exposure on social media significantly enhances brand awareness and brand recall by increasing familiarity with branded content (Chen & Lin, 2019; Moslehpour et al., 2022; Xia et al., 2025).

The findings further suggest that TikTok's algorithm functions not only as a content distribution mechanism but also as a facilitator of cognitive brand formation. Beyond exposure frequency, participants emphasized that visual identity, distinctive packaging, and engaging content presentation strengthened brand recognition and brand associations. These findings are consistent with research indicating that personalized algorithmic recommendations increase brand visibility and accelerate product discovery, thereby facilitating the development of brand awareness (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Ying et al., 2025).

However, this study also reveals that brand awareness alone is insufficient to generate purchase decisions. Although repeated exposure increased familiarity and curiosity, participants consistently sought additional information, compared alternatives, and evaluated user reviews before making purchases. This finding supports previous studies arguing that brand awareness represents an early cognitive stage of consumer decision-making, while purchase behavior depends on subsequent evaluations involving trust, perceived value, and consumer engagement (Kaiwa et al., 2024; Osei-Frimpong et al., 2022; Salhab et al., 2023).

Thus, algorithm-driven brand awareness represents the second stage of the consumer experiential journey. TikTok's recommendation algorithm transforms repeated exposure into cognitive familiarity, enabling consumers to progress from brand recognition to active information seeking before validating their decisions through social proof.

Community-Based Trust Formation

This study demonstrates that Generation Z develops trust on TikTok primarily through community-based validation rather than brand-generated communication. Before making purchase decisions, participants consistently verified product information by examining comments, ratings, reviews, and the experiences of other users. These findings support previous studies indicating that social proof and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) are critical determinants of trust in digital environments because they are perceived as more credible than firm-generated promotional messages (Salhab et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2024; Ismael et al., 2025).

The findings further reveal that trust depends on the credibility, authenticity, and transparency of information sources. Participants trusted creators who demonstrated genuine product experiences while expressing skepticism toward paid endorsements and highly commercialized content. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that authentic user-generated content and credible influencers strengthen consumer trust and reduce information uncertainty (Audrezet et al., 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019; O'Brien et al., 2025).

Moreover, social proof functioned as an important risk-reduction mechanism. Positive reviews reinforced consumers' confidence, whereas negative comments and poor ratings frequently discouraged purchase intentions. This finding supports previous studies demonstrating that online reviews and perceived value

significantly influence consumer evaluation and purchase decisions in social commerce environments (Kaiwa et al., 2024; Simbolon & Law, 2022; Vidyanata, 2022).

Overall, community-based trust formation represents the third stage of the consumer experiential journey. Following brand awareness, Generation Z seeks social validation from the TikTok community before making purchasing decisions. Trust therefore emerges as a collective outcome of shared consumer experiences rather than a direct consequence of brand communication, highlighting the central role of digital communities in reducing uncertainty and facilitating informed purchase decisions.

Digital Consumer Reflexivity

This study demonstrates that repeated interaction with TikTok content marketing fosters digital consumer reflexivity among Generation Z. Rather than passively accepting marketing messages, participants actively evaluated and verified information through multiple sources, including user reviews, comments, creator experiences, and product comparisons before making purchase decisions. This finding supports previous research suggesting that digital consumers increasingly rely on multiple information sources to reduce uncertainty and improve decision quality (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Laradi et al., 2023; Zhang and Li, 2025).

The findings further indicate that TikTok functions not only as an entertainment platform but also as an information ecosystem that facilitates consumer learning and informed decision-making. Participants used search functions, reviews, and user-generated content to triangulate information, reflecting the growing role of social media in supporting digital information processing. This result is consistent with previous studies showing that social media enhances consumer knowledge, perceived value, and purchase decision quality through interactive information exchange (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Vidyanata, 2022; Kaiwa, Yuliati and Nurhayat, 2024).

Moreover, participants demonstrated higher expectations for authenticity, transparency, and honesty in marketing communication. Promotional content supported by genuine user experiences was perceived as substantially more credible than exaggerated or purely commercial messages, reinforcing previous findings that authenticity and user-generated content strengthen consumer trust and engagement (Audrezet et al., 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Salhab et al., 2023).

Overall, digital consumer reflexivity represents the final stage of the consumer experiential journey. Through accumulated digital experiences, Generation Z evolves from passive information recipients into active evaluators who critically assess marketing content, reduce purchase uncertainty, and make more informed purchasing decisions. This finding extends the consumer experience literature by demonstrating that repeated interactions with TikTok not only influence immediate purchase behavior but also reshape consumers' long-term information evaluation strategies and digital decision-making capabilities.

Research Implications

Theoretical Implications

This study expands the digital marketing literature by demonstrating that the influence of content marketing on purchasing decisions occurs through a multi-step experiential process, starting with content engagement, building brand awareness, building trust through social proof, and ultimately, the purchase decision and digital reflexivity. These findings offer a phenomenological perspective that Generation Z purchasing decisions are the result of an experiential interpretation process, not simply a response to exposure to marketing content.

Practical Implications

For companies, the results of this study indicate that content marketing strategies on TikTok need to prioritize authentic, informative, and relevant content that aligns with the characteristics of Generation Z. In addition to building brand awareness through consistent content exposure, companies also need to strengthen social proof through customer reviews, comments, and collaborations with credible creators. Furthermore, providing transparent and easily verifiable product information is crucial because Generation Z tends to make rational evaluations before making purchasing decisions.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Generation Z's experience interpreting content marketing on TikTok is a continuous process. Interest in content is influenced by its authentic, engaging, and informative characteristics, which are then reinforced through repeated exposure on the For You Page (FYP), thus building brand awareness. Furthermore, trust in a product is built through social proof, such as reviews, comments, and other users' experiences. While viral content can generate initial interest, the ultimate purchase decision is largely

determined by an evaluation of price, product quality, information credibility, and suitability for the consumer's needs.

In addition to influencing purchasing decisions, interacting with content marketing on TikTok also encourages the development of a more reflective attitude in evaluating digital information. Generation Z no longer relies on a single source of information, but instead verifies it through various reviews, comments, and other users' experiences before making a decision. Thus, this research confirms that the consumer experiential journey is the result of a meaning-making process involving the interaction between content type, social validation, and consumers' critical evaluation of the social media information they receive

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