



A Study on a Role of Social Media Engagement in Building Brand Loyalty among Gen Z Consumers

ABHISHEK SINGH BHADAURIYA

MBA Scholar, Maharana Pratap Engineering College, Kanpur

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between social media engagement and brand loyalty formation among Generation Z (Gen Z) consumers in Kanpur, a tier-2 city in India. Employing a descriptive cross-sectional design with a structured survey administered to 200 Gen Z respondents aged 18–26, the research identifies content authenticity, peer-driven social proof, and community-oriented engagement as the three most significant predictors of brand loyalty. Instagram and YouTube emerge as the dominant platforms for loyalty formation, while information overload, algorithm opacity, and influencer fatigue constitute the primary barriers. Findings reveal that 80–85% of respondents regard perceived brand authenticity as the single most critical loyalty determinant — outweighing price and product quality. The study contributes original empirical insights on Gen Z brand behaviour in tier-2 urban India, an underrepresented context in existing digital marketing literature, and provides actionable strategic recommendations for brand managers, platform developers, and policymakers.

Keywords: *Social Media Engagement · Brand Loyalty · Generation Z · Digital Marketing · Influencer Marketing · India · Tier-2 Cities · Consumer Behaviour*

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social media as the dominant communication and commerce infrastructure has fundamentally restructured how brands build, sustain, and measure consumer loyalty. For Generation Z — individuals born between 1997 and 2012 — this restructuring is not merely contextual but constitutive: this cohort grew up inside social media ecosystems and cannot be understood apart from them. With approximately 375 million Gen Z individuals in India alone, and smartphone penetration now crossing 750 million users, the country represents one of the world's most consequential arenas for studying digital brand loyalty dynamics (IAMAI, 2024).

Despite the commercial importance of Gen Z consumers, scholarly understanding of how social media engagement specifically drives brand loyalty formation in tier-2 Indian cities remains limited. Existing research disproportionately concentrates on Western markets (Brodie et al., 2013; Dolan et al., 2019) or Indian metropolitan centres such as Mumbai and Bangalore (Sharma & Gupta, 2022), leaving the brand behaviour of



Gen Z consumers in cities like Kanpur — home to over three million residents and a rapidly digitalising youth population — substantially underexplored.

This paper addresses that gap by examining the role of social media engagement in building brand loyalty among Gen Z consumers in Kanpur. Three core questions drive the inquiry: (1) Which social media engagement dimensions most significantly predict brand loyalty among Kanpur's Gen Z population? (2) What platform-specific and content-specific patterns characterise high-loyalty Gen Z consumers? (3) What structural barriers prevent deeper brand loyalty formation through social media in this context? By combining quantitative survey data with conceptual synthesis of the digital brand loyalty literature, the study generates both theoretical contributions and actionable managerial guidance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Brand Loyalty in the Digital Age*

Classical brand loyalty scholarship established the concept as a dual construct encompassing behavioural commitment (repeat purchase) and attitudinal commitment (emotional preference), with Aaker (1991) positioning loyalty as the apex dimension of brand equity. Oliver's (1999) influential four-stage model — cognitive, affective, conative, and action loyalty — provided a sequential framework within which digital scholars have subsequently identified social media as a powerful accelerator, particularly at the affective and conative stages.

The shift from broadcast to dialogic marketing brought about by social media created what Brodie et al. (2013) term 'online brand community engagement,' characterised by immersion, absorption, and active participation. Their empirical work demonstrated that community engagement positively and significantly predicted loyalty, satisfaction, empowerment, and connection — a cluster of outcomes particularly resonant for Gen Z whose identity formation is intertwined with digital community membership.

2.2 *Generation Z as a Distinct Consumer Cohort*

Gen Z's consumer behaviour diverges from Millennial patterns in several theoretically significant respects. Priporas et al. (2017) identify hyper-connectivity, platform fluidity, and acute authenticity sensitivity as defining Gen Z characteristics. Unlike Millennials who 'discovered' social media as young adults, Gen Z never experienced a pre-digital consumer environment, rendering traditional persuasion models structurally inadequate for this cohort.

Of particular theoretical significance is what Francis and Hoefel (2018) describe as Gen Z's 'pragmatic idealism': a disposition that demands verifiable alignment between brand values and brand actions. This orientation elevates corporate social responsibility (CSR) and ethical transparency from peripheral differentiation factors to core loyalty prerequisites. Brands that perform social responsibility without structural organisational commitment face swift and vocal Gen Z backlash, generating what researchers term 'purpose-washing' backlash effects (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021).

2.3 *Social Media Engagement: Conceptualisation and Measurement*

Social media engagement is a multidimensional construct. Van Doorn et al. (2010) conceptualise customer engagement as behavioural manifestations beyond purchase, including social media interactions, recommendations, and co-creation. Hollebeek et al. (2014) distinguish cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement dimensions, each with distinct implications for brand loyalty outcomes.

Engagement intensity follows a hierarchical structure: passive consumption (viewing/scrolling) → active contribution (liking, commenting, sharing) → co-creation (UGC, brand advocacy, community leadership). Each ascending level is associated with progressively deeper brand loyalty and higher Customer



Lifetime Value (CLV) (Broadsheet al., 2011). For Gen Z, co-creation is both an engagement behaviour and an identity practice — creating brand content signals peer group membership and personal values.

2.4 Trust, Authenticity, and Influencer Marketing

Consumer trust in brand communications is the foundational precondition for social media-driven loyalty formation, yet Gen Z maintains distinctively lower trust in branded content than any preceding cohort. Edelman (2021) reports that only 34% of global Gen Z consumers trust brand-produced social media content, versus 58% who trust content from 'people like me.' This trust asymmetry has fundamentally restructured the social media marketing ecosystem toward influencer-mediated brand communication.

However, the maturation of influencer marketing has produced a secondary trust problem: influencer fatigue. As commercial partnerships have proliferated, Gen Z audiences have developed sophisticated detection capabilities for inauthentic endorsements, with 47% reporting reduced trust in influencers following perception of purely transactional partnerships (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023). This dynamic is driving market demand for micro-influencers (10K–500K followers) whose smaller but more genuinely engaged audiences command higher trust premiums.

2.5 Research Gaps

Despite substantial advances in digital brand loyalty scholarship, three significant gaps remain. First, the overwhelming majority of empirical studies draw on Western or East Asian consumer populations, with Indian Gen Z — the world's largest Gen Z demographic — represented primarily through industry reports rather than peer-reviewed research. Second, existing Indian digital marketing studies are disproportionately concentrated on metropolitan consumers (Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore), neglecting the substantively different digital consumption contexts of tier-2 cities. Third, most studies operationalise social media engagement as a unidimensional construct, missing the differential loyalty effects of platform-specific engagement types. This study addresses all three gaps.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical frameworks. Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) provides the foundational logic: brand-consumer social media interactions constitute exchanges of value — brands offer content, entertainment, and community; consumers reciprocate with attention, data, advocacy, and ultimately loyalty. When brands consistently deliver high exchange value (authentic content, responsive engagement, community belonging), consumers develop felt obligations of loyalty reciprocity.

Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), updated for the social media context by Labrecque (2014), explains how Gen Z consumers form one-sided but psychologically real relationships with brand-associated content creators, translating creator trust into brand trust through loyalty transfer. This mechanism is particularly relevant to infrequency-mediated brand engagement.

Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) contextualises Gen Z brand loyalty as an identity practice: brand choices signal group membership and self-concept alignment. Brands that successfully embed themselves in Gen Z identity ecosystems — through authentic community building, cultural relevance, and value congruence — achieve the deepest and most resilient loyalty outcomes.



Table 1: Conceptual Framework — Social Media Engagement → Brand Loyalty Pathways

Engagement Dimension	Mechanism (Theory)	Loyalty Outcome
Content Authenticity	Social Exchange: value delivery	Attitudinal Loyalty
Peer Social Proof / UGC	Social Exchange + Identity Theory	Behavioural Loyalty
Parasocial Creator Bonds	Parasocial Interaction Theory	Emotional Brand Attachment
Community Participation	Identity Theory: group membership	Brand Advocacy
Interactive Features (polls, Q&A)	Social Exchange: reciprocity	Conative Loyalty
Value/CSR Alignment	Identity Theory: self-concept fit	Resilient Long-term Loyalty

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

The study employs a descriptive, cross-sectional research design combining quantitative and qualitative elements. A structured questionnaire serves as the primary instrument, supplemented by open-ended items and informal focus group conversations to enrich quantitative findings with contextual depth.

4.2 Sampling

The target population comprises Gen Z individuals aged 18–26 years, resident in Kanpur, and active social media users (minimum one hour daily engagement) who have followed or interacted with at least one brand account. Purposive convenience sampling was employed. A final sample of $n = 200$ respondents was retained after data cleaning, providing adequate statistical power for the planned analyses (Cohen, 1992).

4.3 Instrument

The questionnaire comprised seven sections: (1) demographic profile; (2) platform usage assessment; (3) brand engagement behaviour; (4) perceptions and attitudes toward brand content; (5) brand loyalty indicators (attitudinal, behavioural, and advocacy); (6) barriers and challenges; and (7) future engagement intentions. Loyalty items were adapted from Oliver's (1999) validated loyalty scale and Hollebeek et al.'s (2014) engagement scale, modified for social media contexts. A five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) was used for attitudinal items. A pilot test with $n = 20$ respondents confirmed clarity and cultural appropriateness; minor item revisions were made before full deployment.

4.4 Data Collection

Data was collected between August and December 2025 through three channels: in-person surveys at educational institutions, shopping centres, and cafés; online questionnaires distributed via Instagram DMs and WhatsApp; and telephonic interviews for respondents preferring voice-based participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants; anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout.

4.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS v26. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) characterised the sample and key variables. Cross-tabulation and chi-square tests examined relationships between demographic variables and loyalty outcomes. Pearson correlation analysis assessed associations between engagement intensity scores and brand loyalty composite scores. Factor analysis (principal



component, varimax rotation) identified underlying engagement dimension structures. Qualitative responses were analysed through thematic content analysis to identify recurrent barriers and facilitators.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Sample Profile

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 200)

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Age Sub-Group	18–20 years (Early Gen Z)	35.5%
	21–23 years (Core Gen Z)	42.0%
	24–26 years (Late Gen Z)	22.5%
Gender	Female	54.0%
	Male	44.5%
	Non-binary / Prefer not to say	1.5%
Education	Undergraduate	58.0%
	Postgraduate	29.0%
	Diploma / Other	13.0%
Monthly Income (₹)	Below 10,000	28.5%
	10,000–25,000	38.0%
	25,000–50,000	22.5%
Daily Social Media Use	Above 50,000	11.0%
	1–2 hours	18.0%
	2–4 hours	43.5%
	4–6 hours	28.0%
	6+ hours	10.5%

5.2 Platform Usage and Brand Engagement Patterns

Instagram is the dominant platform for brand discovery and loyalty formation, cited as a primary brand engagement channel by 77.5% of respondents. YouTube (67.5%) ranks second and is most associated with deep, content-driven brand loyalty through long-form tutorials, reviews, and brand storytelling. Short-form video — Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts — is identified by 71.0% of respondents as the most effective content format for initial brand awareness and emotional connection.



Table 3: Platform Engagement and Loyalty Impact

Platform	Primary Brand Use (%)	Daily Time (avg.)	Brand Eng. Rate	Loyalty Potential
Instagram	77.5%	35 min	3–6%	Very High
YouTube	67.5%	45 min	1–3%	Very High
YouTube/Insta Shorts	71.0%	30 min	5–9%	High
Snapchat	38.5%	25 min	2–4%	Moderate
Twitter / X	22.0%	18 min	0.5–1%	Moderate
WhatsApp	64.0%	30 min	N/A	High (community)

5.3 Brand Loyalty Drivers: Key Findings

Factor analysis identified three dominant engagement dimensions predicting brand loyalty, collectively explaining 68.3% of variance in the brand loyalty composite score:

- Factor 1 — Authenticity & Value Alignment (eigenvalue = 4.82, 31.4% variance): Items loading on this factor included perceived brand genuineness, consistency between stated and enacted values, and CSR credibility. Mean loyalty score for high-loading consumers: 4.31/5.00.
- Factor 2 — Peer Social Proof & Community (eigenvalue = 3.17, 20.6% variance): Loaded on peer recommendation weight, UGC participation, and brand community belonging. Mean loyalty score: 4.08/5.00.
- Factor 3 — Influencer & Creator Trust (eigenvalue = 2.50, 16.3% variance): Loaded on micro-influencer endorsement credibility, parasocial connection strength, and creator-brand alignment perception. Mean loyalty score: 3.87/5.00.

Pearson correlation analysis confirmed significant positive associations: Authenticity & Value Alignment ↔ Brand Loyalty Composite: $r = 0.74, p < 0.001$; Peer Social Proof ↔ Brand Loyalty: $r = 0.68, p < 0.001$; Influencer & Creator Trust ↔ Brand Loyalty: $r = 0.61, p < 0.001$.

Table 4: Key Loyalty Driver Findings

Brand Loyalty Driver	% Citing as Critical	Mean Score (/5)	Correlation (r)
Perceived Brand Authenticity	82.5%	4.31	0.74***
Peer Recommendation / Social Proof	72.0%	4.08	0.68***
Content Quality & Relevance	67.5%	3.94	0.63***
Micro-Influencer Credibility	61.0%	3.87	0.61***
Community Belonging	55.5%	3.76	0.57***
CSR / Environmental Commitment	49.0%	3.65	0.52***
Interactive Features (polls/Q&A)	43.5%	3.44	0.47***

Note: *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed). Scores are self-reported on a five-point Likert scale.



5.4 Barriers to Brand Loyalty Formation

Five principal barriers emerged from both quantitative responses and thematic qualitative analysis:

- Information Overload (cited by 63.5%): Exposure to 3,000–5,000 daily brand messages creates attention scarcity, compressing meaningful engagement windows to under two seconds per content item.
- Algorithm Opacity and Declining Organic Reach (58.0%): Respondents expressed frustration that platform algorithmic changes prevent consistent access to brand content they voluntarily follow.
- Influencer Fatigue and Credibility Erosion (47.5%): Growing ability to detect undisclosed paid partnerships reduces trust in influencer-mediated brand endorsements.
- Purpose-Washing Scepticism (44.5%): Awareness that brand social justice and sustainability content may be performative rather than organisationally embedded generates loyalty-damaging cynicism.
- Price Sensitivity and Switching Ease (38.0%): Financial constraints among tier-2 Gen Z consumers, combined with frictionless digital brand switching, undermine loyalty continuity even among attitudinally committed consumers.

5.5 Consumer Segmentation

Cluster analysis of engagement patterns and psychographic survey items identified five distinct Gen Z brand loyalty segments:

Segment	Share	Primary Loyalty Driver	Strategic Priority
Identity Expressers	22%	Brand-identity integration, UGC co-creation	High advocacy leverage
Value Seekers	27%	CSR authenticity, value congruence	Resilient long-term loyalty
Trend Navigators	21%	Cultural relevance, viral engagement	High short-term engagement
Community Seekers	18%	Brand community belonging, peer validation	Deepest loyalty once established
Pragmatic Loyalists	12%	Consistent quality delivery, reliability	Highest purchase conversion

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Authenticity as the Dominant Loyalty Mechanism

The overwhelming primacy of perceived brand authenticity as a loyalty determinant ($r = 0.74$) extends and strengthens Keller's (2020) argument that authenticity has surpassed product quality as the central axis of brand equity for Gen Z. This finding is theoretically grounded in Social Exchange Theory: Gen Z consumers invest loyalty capital in brands that deliver genuine, non-transactional value — authentic storytelling, transparent communication, and verifiable organisational commitment — as opposed to brands whose social media presence functions as a performative attention-capture mechanism.

The strength of this association in tier-2 Kanpur is particularly notable. Unlike metropolitan Gen Z consumers who have extensive exposure to sophisticated brand marketing, Kanpur Gen Z respondents show even stronger sensitivity to authenticity signals, likely reflecting the higher relative weight of community reputation and peer trust networks in smaller urban ecosystems where brand missteps are more visibly discussed and socially costly.



6.2 The Evolving Influencer Trust Landscape

The moderate but significant correlation between influencer trust and loyalty ($r = 0.61$) reflects the maturation dynamics described in Section 2.4: influencer marketing retains substantial loyalty-building capacity, but its effectiveness is increasingly contingent on perceived creator-brand value alignment rather than creator reach. This finding is consistent with De Veirman et al. (2017) and supports the emerging consensus in influencer marketing scholarship that follower count is a poor proxy for brand loyalty impact.

The prevalence of influencer fatigue (47.5% of respondents) in tier-2 Kanpur — a city where influencer marketing is less saturated than metropolitan markets — suggests that this credibility erosion may be driven by national platform dynamics rather than local market maturation. Indian Gen Z consumers are processing influencer authenticity signals across the entire national influencer ecosystem, making them sensitive to credibility failures by high-profile influencers even in markets they do not personally inhabit.

6.3 Community as Loyalty Infrastructure

The significant loyalty effect of community belonging ($r = 0.57$) supports Identity Theory's prediction that brand loyalty is most resilient when brands become identity infrastructure rather than mere consumption choices. Brands that create genuine community spaces — WhatsApp groups, Instagram comment cultures, co-creation campaigns — achieve loyalty outcomes that transcend individual content encounters. This finding has particular strategic relevance for tier-2 markets like Kanpur where physical community networks remain strong and digital brand communities can function as extensions of existing social trust structures.

6.4 Structural Barriers: Implications for Theory and Practice

The pervasive impact of information overload (63.5%) and algorithm opacity (58.0%) represents a structural challenge that individual brand strategies cannot fully resolve. These findings support calls in the digital marketing literature (Hamilton et al., 2021) for platform-level governance reforms that restore meaningful organic reach and provide transparent content distribution frameworks. From a theoretical standpoint, these structural barriers suggest that the social exchange framework must incorporate platform infrastructure as a third-party variable moderating the brand-consumer exchange relationship.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 For Brand Managers and Digital Marketers

1. **Authenticity-First Content Strategy:** Develop a systematic 'authenticity audit' process that evaluates all social media content against three criteria: (a) does it reflect verifiable organisational values? (b) does it invite genuine two-way interaction? (c) does it add value to the consumer independent of its promotional intent? Content failing these criteria should be revised before publication.

2. **Micro-Influencer Prioritisation:** Establish structured partnership criteria that prioritise creator-brand value alignment over follower reach. Implement mandatory product experience periods (minimum 4–6 weeks) before influencer content production to ensure authentic endorsements that resist Gen Z authenticity scrutiny.

3. **Regional Content Localisation for Tier-2 Markets:** Invest in Hindi and regional language content strategies that reflect tier-2 cultural contexts, humour registers, and lived experiences. Brands that persist with metropolitan-centric content in tier-2 markets sacrifice significant community credibility.

4. **Community Infrastructure Investment:** Shift social media investment from content production scale to community management depth. Systematic response protocols (target: sub-24-hour engagement on all brand mentions), co-creation campaigns, and brand-associated WhatsApp communities convert followers into advocates.



7.2 For Digital Platform Developers

Platform developers should prioritise algorithm transparency, enabling both brands and consumers to understand content distribution dynamics. Enhanced paid partnership labelling tools and regional language community support features would materially improve the integrity and inclusivity of social media brand engagement ecosystems in India.

7.3 For Policymakers

Comprehensive influencer marketing disclosure regulations — analogous to FTC guidelines but adapted for India's creator economy scale — are urgently needed. Concurrently, digital media literacy programmes for tier-2 and tier-3 city Gen Z consumers would equip this cohort with the critical evaluation skills necessary to navigate increasingly complex commercial social media environments.

8. CONCLUSION

This study provides rigorous empirical evidence that social media engagement is a fundamental mechanism for Gen Z brand loyalty formation in tier-2 urban India. Perceived brand authenticity, peer social proof, and community belonging emerge as the three dominant loyalty drivers, collectively explaining 68.3% of loyalty variance in the study sample. Instagram and YouTube are the strategic platform priorities for brand loyalty development among Kanpur Gen Z consumers, with short-form video as the most effective discovery and emotional connection format.

Structurally, information overload, algorithm opacity, and influencer fatigue constitute the primary barriers to deeper loyalty formation — barriers that require platform-level and policy-level interventions beyond individual brand strategy. The five-segment psychographic typology (Identity Expressers, Value Seekers, Trend Navigators, Community Seekers, Pragmatic Loyalists) provides a practically actionable framework for brand managers designing differentiated Gen Z engagement strategies.

Theoretically, this study advances Social Exchange Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and Identity Theory as complementary explanatory frameworks for digital brand loyalty, and demonstrates their applicability to the culturally and economically distinct context of tier-2 urban India. Future research should pursue longitudinal designs to track how these loyalty dynamics evolve as Gen Z matures, employs larger multi-city samples to test generalisability, and incorporates experimental methods to establish causal rather than correlational relationships between specific engagement interventions and loyalty outcomes.

As Generation Z assumes its full weight in India's consumer economy, the brands that invest now in authentic, community-centered, and culturally localised social media engagement will secure the loyalty relationships that define market leadership in the decades ahead.