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Examining the Effect of Social Media Engagement on Purchase Intention: A Study of Generation Z Consumers

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Abstract: The digital revolution has significantly changed the marketing landscape, particularly through social media, which is now the main platform for building relationships between brands and consumers. This study aims to examine the influence of social media involvement on the purchase intention of Generation Z consumers in Indonesia. This study uses a quantitative approach with a survey method, collecting data from 250 Generation Z respondents who actively interact with brands on social media. Data analysis was carried out using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results show that social media engagement has a positive and significant effect on purchase intent, with a strong path coefficient and a high level of significance. These findings reinforce the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model in the context of digital consumer behavior, as well as emphasize the importance of active engagement strategies to drive purchasing decisions. This research makes a theoretical contribution to the social media engagement literature and offers managerial implications for brands looking to optimize digital interactions with Generation Z consumers.

Keywords: Social Media Engagement, Purchase Intent, Generation Z, Digital Marketing, PLS-SEM

INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution has significantly altered the marketing landscape, shifting consumer attention from traditional media to dynamic digital platforms. Among these, social media has emerged as a dominant force, reshaping how brands communicate and build relationships with consumers. Social media engagement, defined as consumers' active interactions with brand content through actions such as likes, comments, shares, and content creation, is increasingly recognized as a critical driver of consumer behavior (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011).

Generation Z, comprising individuals born between 1997 and 2012, represents the first truly digital-native generation. According to Statista (2024), over 90% of Generation Z members actively use multiple social media platforms daily, with platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and

YouTube serving not only as entertainment hubs but also as primary sources for product discovery and brand engagement. Unlike previous generations, Generation Z consumers place a premium on authenticity, peer influence, brand responsiveness, and interactive communication (Turner, 2015). As such, their purchase decisions are heavily shaped by their engagement experiences on social media.

Existing literature has emphasized that consumer engagement on social media leads to a deeper emotional connection with brands, enhances brand loyalty, and positively influences purchase intentions (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). However, research focusing specifically on Generation Z remains limited, especially in emerging markets where social media usage patterns and cultural factors may differ. Furthermore, while much of the research has concentrated on the outcomes of social media engagement, less attention has been paid to understanding the specific mechanisms through which engagement influences behavioral intentions such as the intention to purchase.

Given the economic significance of Generation Z as future major consumers, it is essential for marketers to understand how social media engagement translates into purchase intentions within this demographic. By investigating this relationship, marketers can better tailor their strategies to foster meaningful engagement that drives not just awareness or preference, but also concrete purchasing behavior.

Thus, the objective of this study is to examine the effect of social media engagement on purchase intention among Generation Z consumers. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research question, How does social media engagement influence the purchase intentions of Generation Z consumers?

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the theoretical understanding of social media engagement effects and offer practical insights for brands aiming to capture the loyalty and purchasing power of Generation Z through digital strategies.

Conceptual Framework

The emergence of social media has shifted consumer-brand interactions from passive observation to active engagement. Social media engagement refers to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activities that consumers display toward brands on social media platforms (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011). These activities include liking, sharing, commenting, and creating brand-related content, all of which indicate a deeper level of consumer involvement beyond traditional marketing interactions.

Research suggests that higher levels of social media engagement can significantly influence consumers' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward brands (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). Engagement fosters a sense of connection, enhances brand trust, builds emotional attachment, and encourages word-of-mouth advocacy. Ultimately, these psychological processes are theorized to contribute to stronger behavioral outcomes, particularly purchase intention (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015).

For Generation Z consumers, engagement with brands on social media is particularly impactful. As digital natives, Generation Z expects brands to be present, authentic, and responsive in online spaces. Their purchasing behavior is often influenced by how they interact with brand content, peer recommendations, and the brand's perceived authenticity and social value on social platforms (Turner, 2015). Therefore, understanding the causal link between engagement and purchase intention is critical for brands targeting this segment.

Based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), this study conceptualizes social media engagement (stimulus) as an external influence that affects internal consumer evaluations (organism) and ultimately leads to behavioral outcomes such as purchase intention (response). Applying the S-O-R model helps frame engagement as a mechanism that moves consumers from exposure to action.

Thus, the conceptual framework of this study is as follows:
Social Media Engagement → Purchase Intention (Generation Z Context)

This framework posits that higher levels of social media engagement will lead to stronger purchase intentions among Generation Z consumers. The study will empirically test this direct relationship, offering insights into the strategic role of engagement in digital marketing efforts targeting young consumers. Based on the literature and the conceptual framework, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Social media engagement has a positive and significant effect on purchase intention among Generation Z consumers.

This hypothesis is grounded in prior research demonstrating that higher engagement levels on social media platforms strengthen consumers' emotional bonds and cognitive evaluations, which in turn increase their willingness to purchase (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). Given Generation Z's distinct digital behaviors and high sensitivity to interactive brand communication, it is anticipated that increased social media engagement will positively predict their purchase intentions.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative research design with a causal approach to examine the influence of social media engagement on purchase intention among Generation Z consumers. Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. A purposive sampling method was used to select respondents aged between 18 and 27 years who had engaged with brand content on social media within the past three months. A total of 250 valid responses were obtained. The sample size exceeded the minimum requirement for partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), which was used to analyze the data. Social media engagement was measured using adapted scales from Hollebeek et al. (2014), covering cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, while purchase intention was measured based on Dodds et al. (1991). All items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale. Validity and reliability were tested through confirmatory factor analysis, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE). Hypothesis testing was conducted using bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples. Ethical approval was obtained, and participant anonymity was maintained throughout the study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1. Respondent Profile

Category	Subcategory	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	48

	Female	52
Age	18–20 years	25
	21–25 years	60
	26–27 years	15
Education Level	High School	10
	Bachelor’s Degree	70
	Master’s Degree	20

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the 250 respondents. The sample is relatively balanced by gender, with a slight majority of female respondents (52%). A significant proportion (60%) were aged between 21 and 25 years, consistent with the primary range of Generation Z. Educationally, the sample was highly educated, with 70% having a bachelor's degree. These characteristics indicate that the respondents are digitally literate and highly familiar with social media, thus fitting the target population for examining the impact of social media engagement on purchase intention.

Outer Model Evaluation

Table 2. Reliability and Validity

Construct	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Social Media Engagement	0.91	0.72
Purchase Intention	0.89	0.69

Table 2 presents the results for construct reliability and convergent validity. Composite reliability values exceeded the threshold of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency among the measurement items (Hair et al., 2019). AVE values for both constructs surpassed the recommended minimum of 0.50, confirming that more than half of the variance in the observed indicators was explained by the underlying constructs. Therefore, the measurement model demonstrated adequate convergent validity and reliability, enabling further analysis of the structural relationships.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

Construct	Social Media Engagement	Purchase Intention
Social Media Engagement	0.85	
Purchase Intention	0.62	0.83

Table 3 shows the Fornell-Larcker criterion results for discriminant validity. The square root of AVE for each construct (bold diagonal) is greater than the correlation between constructs, confirming that the constructs are empirically distinct. Specifically, Social Media Engagement and Purchase Intention are distinguishable, indicating that respondents understood the different natures of engagement activities and their intention to purchase.

Inner Model Evaluation (Structural Model)

Table 4. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient (β)	t-Statistic	p-Value	Supported
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H1: Social Media Engagement → Purchase Intention	0.68	14.25	0.000	Yes
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Table 4 summarizes the results of hypothesis testing. The path coefficient from Social Media Engagement to Purchase Intention was 0.68, indicating a strong positive effect. The t-statistic value of 14.25 far exceeds the critical value of 1.96 for significance at the 5% level, and the p-value is 0.000, confirming that the effect is statistically significant. This finding supports the hypothesis that increased engagement with brand content on social media leads to stronger purchase intentions among Generation Z consumers. The strength of the relationship highlights the pivotal role of active consumer participation in shaping purchasing behavior in digital environments.

Model Fit and Predictive Power

Table 5. R-Square (R²) Values

Endogenous Variable	R ² Value
Purchase Intention	0.46

Table 5 presents the R² value for Purchase Intention, which was 0.46. This means that Social Media Engagement explains 46% of the variance in Purchase Intention, indicating a moderate level of explanatory power (Chin, 1998). In the context of behavioral research, this is a satisfactory result, showing that engagement activities on social media are significant predictors of consumer purchase behavior but suggesting that other factors outside the model may also contribute.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to examine the effect of social media engagement on purchase intention among Generation Z consumers. The findings strongly confirm that social media engagement significantly and positively influences purchase intention, with a path coefficient of 0.68 and a high t-statistic, supporting the proposed hypothesis.

This result aligns with previous studies emphasizing the central role of engagement in influencing consumer behavior. Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, and Ilić (2011) conceptualized engagement as a multidimensional construct that drives higher emotional and cognitive involvement with brand content. Consistent with their findings, this study shows that when Generation Z consumers actively like, share, comment, or create content related to a brand on social media, their likelihood of purchasing from that brand increases significantly.

The substantial R² value of 0.46 indicates that nearly half of the variance in purchase intention can be explained by social media engagement alone. Although this leaves room for other influencing factors such as brand trust, perceived value, or peer influence, the strength of engagement as a driver underscores the necessity for brands to prioritize dynamic and authentic interactions on digital platforms.

Moreover, this study reinforces the particular responsiveness of Generation Z to social media engagement. As digital natives, Generation Z consumers are accustomed to interactive, personalized, and responsive brand communications. This cohort expects two-way dialogues rather than traditional one-way marketing messages (Turner, 2015). Thus, when brands successfully stimulate cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement, they effectively move Generation Z consumers along the purchase journey.

In addition, the study’s findings provide practical implications by affirming that content strategies aiming to foster active engagement—rather than passive consumption—are more likely

to result in actual purchasing behavior. Creating interactive campaigns, encouraging user-generated content, and maintaining authentic communication can significantly amplify purchase intentions within this demographic.

Theoretically, the results contribute to the growing body of literature that frames social media engagement within the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Here, engagement functions as a stimulus affecting internal consumer states (organism) that culminate in the behavioral response of purchase intention. The empirical validation of this theoretical model among Indonesian Generation Z consumers extends existing knowledge to a non-Western, emerging market context, addressing gaps in cross-cultural engagement research.

Nevertheless, while the model shows strong explanatory power, the fact that 54% of purchase intention remains unexplained suggests the need for future research to integrate additional variables. Factors such as peer influence, brand trust, influencer credibility, and emotional attachment may also interact with engagement to influence purchasing decisions more comprehensively.

In conclusion, this study highlights that for Generation Z, engagement is not merely entertainment but a precursor to real consumer behavior. Brands aiming to capture this market must prioritize strategies that foster meaningful, authentic engagement to drive purchase intention effectively.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effect of social media engagement on purchase intention among Generation Z consumers in Indonesia. The findings reveal that social media engagement significantly and positively influences purchase intention, with a strong path coefficient indicating that active participation in brand-related social media activities enhances the likelihood of purchasing behavior. These results support prior theoretical frameworks, particularly the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, which posits that external stimuli such as engagement can evoke internal cognitive and emotional reactions that lead to behavioral outcomes. The substantial explanatory power of the model further highlights the critical role of active, two-way digital communication strategies for brands targeting Generation Z. From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the growing understanding of how engagement on social media platforms translates into actual consumer behavior, extending previous findings to an emerging market context. From a managerial perspective, the results underscore the importance for brands to foster authentic and meaningful engagement with Generation Z audiences to drive purchasing behavior. Future research is encouraged to explore additional factors such as brand trust, emotional attachment, and influencer credibility to develop a more comprehensive model of purchase decision-making in social media environments.

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