Understanding The Reasoning Behind Gen-Z's Desire for Authenticity in Today's Marketing

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ABSTRACT

Generation-Z is a demographic that largely rejects traditional advertising methods, instead placing a high value on authenticity in their interactions with brands. While this preference is acknowledged, few studies have deeply analysed the specific reasoning behind this generation's desire for authenticity. This research aims to address this gap by investigating the underlying motivations for Gen-Z's demand for "indexical authenticity" in today's marketing. Employing a mixed-method approach, the research gathers data through a questionnaire containing quantitative and qualitative questions with 63 total respondents. The findings reveal that the generation's rejection is an active emotional response, with 68.3% of respondents feeling annoyed by unskippable advertisements, and 83.6% of them skipping ads immediately. The research concludes that Generation-Z defines indexical authenticity through three fundamental pillars: relatability, transparency, and shared values (marketing & content that appeals to their moral compass).

Keywords**:** Authenticity, Advertising, Generation-Z, Indexical Authenticity, Marketing, Social Media

ABSTRAK:

Generasi-Z adalah kelompok demografis yang sebagian besar menolak metode periklanan tradisional dan lebih menghargai keaslian dalam interaksi mereka dengan brand. Meskipun preferensi ini telah diakui, hanya sedikit penelitian yang menganalisis secara mendalam alasan spesifik di balik keinginan generasi ini terhadap keaslian. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengisi kesenjangan tersebut dengan menyelidiki motivasi mendasar dari tuntutan Gen-Z terhadap "indexical authenticity" dalam pemasaran masa kini. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan metode campuran, penelitian mengumpulkan data melalui

kuesioner yang berisi pertanyaan kuantitatif dan kualitatif dengan total 63 responden. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penolakan generasi ini merupakan respons emosional yang aktif, dengan 68,3% responden merasa terganggu oleh iklan yang tidak dapat dilewati, dan 83,6% dari mereka langsung melewati iklan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa Generasi-Z mendefinisikan indexical authenticity melalui tiga pilar utama: relevansi (relatability), transparansi, dan nilai yang sejalan (pemasaran & konten yang sesuai dengan kompas moral mereka).

Kata Kunci: Keaslian, Periklanan, Generasi-Z, Indexical Authenticity, Pemasaran, Media Sosial

INTRODUCTION

Generation-Z is a generation that rejects traditional advertising methods, as it was found that 99% of customers from this generation prefer to hit the skip button on an advertisement if they are prompted with it, with 75% of them feeling bombarded by advertisements and 74% finding themselves feeling irritated by this bombardment of advertisements on their time. The worst form of advertisements are considered to be pop-up ads, with the sampled individuals reporting that they must go through paid endorsements and sponsored posts to see what their friends are doing on social media (Nina, 2022).

This generation is well known for their impatience, spontaneous and free expression, and is a generation known for their FOMO, also known as *fear of missing out*. Visual aesthetics are also a part of their preferences and are vital when attempting to market to them in the digital era (Gosal, 2024). It can be debated as to when Generation-Z was born, but Generation-Z are usually defined in sources as people born between 1996 and 2010 and are often the children of Generation-X individuals (born mid-1960s to 1980). They are colloquially referred to as 'post-Millennials', 'Gen-Z', or even 'Zoomer' (a mix of the terms Generation-Z and Boomer) (Stylos, et al., 2021). The United States Census Bureau as of May 2025 however defines Generation-Z as individuals born between 1997 to 2012, with Generation Alpha coming after them as individuals born after the year 2013.

The generation experiences time as more fragmented and "24/7" than was true in the past when a nine-to-five workday was a widely shared cultural expectation. Members of Generation-Z regard time as a precious commodity, and make most of it a priority. They prefer texting and instant messaging to e-mails because the two are short and hold the potential of an instant response from the other end. Much of this is related to the convenience the internet provides, as everything is just a click away, and so this expectation of convenience bleeds into all aspects of their lives. This generation also looks for "relatable" content in their online communications, as an interviewee regards that she must figure out what will be most relatable to others to ensure that she will keep their attention (Katz, et al., 2022).

Research conducted by Bhattacharya concluded that despite members of Generation-Z being very active on Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, their opinions of brands advertising on these platforms are mostly negative, and that traditional methods of advertising are often not understood by this generation. The generation values meaningful interactions with brands and are more likely to support companies that are aligned with their values. These values include authenticity, personalization, social responsibility, and immersive experiences (Deven Vikram Singh, 2023).

Authenticity is derived from the Greek word's *autos* ('self') and *hentes* ('doer', being'), which originates from the Romantic era belief of a true intrinsic self. While the term originally indicated a rejection towards conformity, it is now culturally defined as encapsulating values of truthfulness, responsibility, and transparency. From a cultural perspective, coming across as 'fake' or 'artificial' can be damaging for brands attempting to market themselves to their target audience (Södergren, 2021).

Information from the passages above indicates that Generation-Z's exhaustion, rejection, and disdain towards traditional marketing styles signals a potential disconnect between what today's marketers perceive as good marketing and what Generation-Z perceives as good marketing, with the generation preferring

marketing campaigns that they perceive as being authentic in an indexical manner. Therefore, it shows that there is a potential form of communication crisis between today's marketers and Generation-Z. What this research aims to investigate is the underlying reasoning on *why* Generation-Z feels this way and why they prefer campaigns or brands they perceive as indexically authentic, as most research on this topic found thus far only explains *what*'s not working when it comes to marketing for this generation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research will utilize mixed method research, which is a combination of the qualitative method and the quantitative method. Qualitative research aims to gain a deep subjective understanding of the topic being researched, and this is specifically achieved by involving individuals, communities, or organizations in the research process. This research method specifically focuses on objects, images, and statements when collecting and analyzing data. It is also an interpretative form of research, where a researcher aims to gain an understanding of the social world by examining how its participants interpret it (Clark, et al., 2021).   In contrast to the qualitative method, the quantitative research method focuses on the objective testing of a researcher's hypothesis, variable measurements, and explaining the correlation between one thing and another. As it is an objective form of research, it focuses on numerical data, the objectivity principle, deductive reasoning, data categorization, and the generalizability of a researcher's findings (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2021 ;   Megawati Sutanto et al., 2023) mentions that quantitative data focuses on the quality of the data rather than its quantity.

And thus, an advantage of a mixed method research is that a researcher will be able to combine statistical trends from quantitative data with personal stories from the qualitative data, leading to a better understanding of the research problem compared to simply using a single method (Creswell, 2014).   Data collection methods are divided into two main categories: primary data collection & secondary data. Primary data is defined as data that is not yet published and is first-hand information obtained by the researcher/researchers. Researchers use different

approaches to gather and collect primary data, and thus the validity, reliability, objectivity, and authenticity of data are often found in primary data rather than secondary data. Secondary data on the other hand are data gathered from already published sources, meaning that often times researchers obtain secondary data from someone else. In all research articles, the literature review section primarily consists on secondary data sources (Taherdoost, 2021).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Södergren also defines the term *brand authenticity* as the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful and true to itself and its consumers, and one who supports its consumers being true to themselves. Zniva et al. states that authenticity as a concept can mean different things to different people especially in differing contexts, and thus two variants of authenticity can be identified, which are: indexical authenticity' and 'iconic authenticity'.

Indexical authenticity is a term used to describe something or someone that is considered to be the original and not a copy, meaning that an object would be perceived as authentic if it is believed to be the original. In the specific context of human individuals, this would mean that an individual's habits are considered authentic if they are believed to reflect who the person really is. Oppositely, a person would appear inauthentic if their actions are thought to solely meet social norms or to make money. For example, a person would be perceived as inauthentic if they were to recommend a product or a brand just because a company is sponsoring them to do so, rather than them being an actual user of the product.

Iconic authenticity, on the other hand, refers to authenticity in the context of evaluating an object's physical appearance that resembles something considered stereotypical. For example, silver pieces in a museum's gift shop are to be considered authentic if they are thought to look like coins made by Spanish colonies in the sixteenth century.

The data for this research was collected from participants utilizing the survey platform Survey Noodle with 20 total questions: 18 quantitative questions in the form of multiple choices, selecting all that applies, and Likert scale questions asking respondents what they thought of a statement to obtain a general understanding of how the respondents felt.

Additionally, there are 2 optional qualitative questions asking participants to elaborate on their feelings regarding some topics, ensuring a deeper understanding regarding a topic can be obtained. The qualitative long answer questions were designed in a way to encourage open-ended answers but ensured highly emotional responses in order to obtain a better understanding of the respondents' emotional state towards a topic, the qualitative questions being optional ensured that respondents provided deeply personal responses.

All visual charts were generated in Google Spreadsheets for easier reading and quality, with the sample size included for each question for transparency purposes. There are a total of 63 respondents who are mostly residing in urban cities in Indonesia, while some other respondents are from European countries (such as Albania & England), with an even smaller minority residing in The Americas.

The respondents are on average 22.05 years old with the youngest respondent being 12 years old, with the oldest respondent being 66 years old. During the analysis of the quantitative data, all respondents from outside of the Generation-Z demographic will be excluded from the dataset to ensure only information relevant to the research demographic will be analyzed.

Additionally, for the treatment of incomplete responses, the pairwise deletion method will be utilized. This deletion technique excludes a respondent only from the specific statistical analyses for which that case has missing data, and therefore a respondent is retained for any other analyses where their responses are present/complete (S.Lewis-Beck et al., 2004).

All analysis will use the U.S Census Bureau's definition of Generation-Z, which defines the generation as being consisting of individuals born in 1997 up to 2013 in order to filter out respondents who do not meet the criteria. To begin, the birth sex distribution of the survey respondents prior to excluding non-generation Z respondents is 46.0% male to 50.8% female, with 3.2% of respondents preferring not to mention. Figure 2 indicates a slight oversampling of female respondents as ideally the sampled respondents should be very close to a 50-50 ratio for both sexes in order to obtain a balanced, objective, and neutral perspective.

On a typical day, which of these social media platforms do you usually use?

n=60, all non Gen-Z respondents excluded

Reddit 0.6%
YouTube 20.4%
X/Twitter 13.4%
TikTok 24.8%
Facebook 3.8%
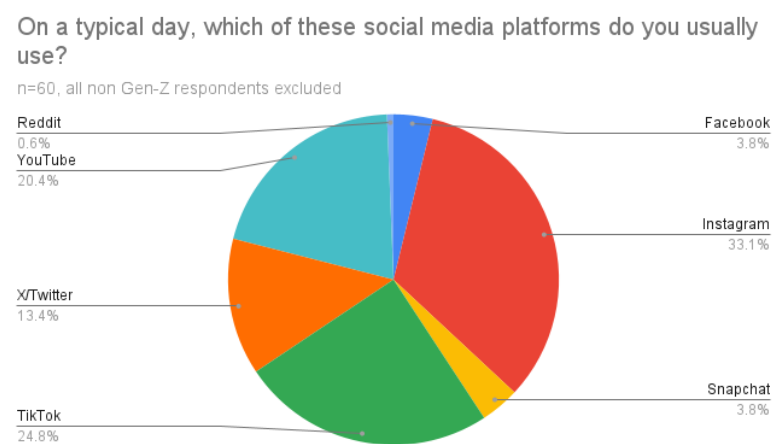Instagram 33.1%
Snapchat 3.8%

Figure 1. A chart of the 60 respondents' social media preferences
source: author's documentation, October 2025

It was found that Generation-Z used Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube the most in a day, with only 0.6% of respondents using Reddit on a typical day. These findings help form an understanding on what types of advertising the respondents are exposed to, which can vary greatly from platform-to-platform.

On a scale of 1 to 5, do you feel like the ads you see online are relevant to your personal interests/hobbies/needs?

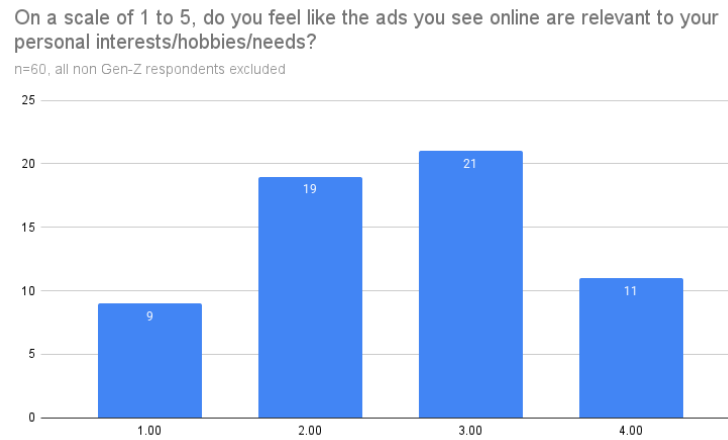n=60, all non Gen-Z respondents excluded

Figure 2. A chart of the 63 respondents' feelings towards advertising relevancy to their personal needs/interests/hobbies.
source: author's documentation, October 2025

When asked to rate from a scale of 1 to 5 if the advertising served to them on these platforms are relevant to their needs, hobbies, or interests, a majority of the respondents answered neutrally, with 21 answering with 3 out of 5 and 19 answering with 2 out of 5. Only 11 respondents answered 4 out of 5, resulting in an average value of 2.57 across all respondents, highlighting that Generation-Z respondents finds most ads somewhat relevant to their interests, but not strongly relevant enough to them as no respondents out of the 61 answered 5 out of 5 to the question.

On a scale of 1 to 5, are you likely to buy a product you see in the ads you see online?

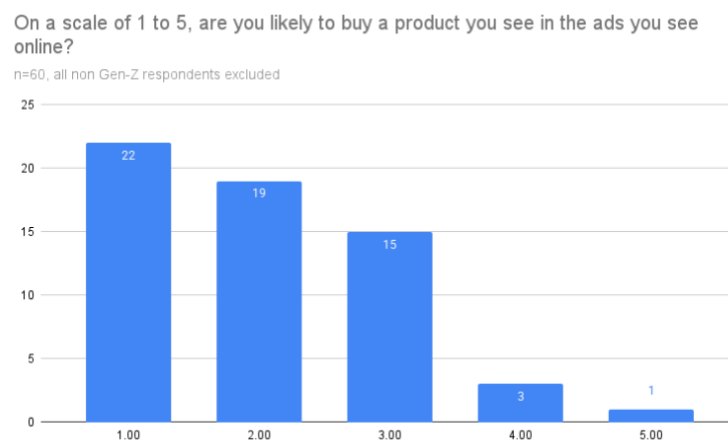n=60, all non Gen-Z respondents excluded

Figure 3. A chart of the 63 respondents' feelings towards purchasing products they see in ads online.
source: author's documentation, October 2025

A stark and interesting contrast emerges from the previous question upon asking the respondents on whether they'd buy the products they see in advertising served to them online, with a vast majority of the respondents answering 1 out of 5, leading to an average value of 2.03 out of 5 across all respondents. This indicates that a vast majority of Generation-Z are very unlikely to buy the products they see in advertising they come across online, indicating some form of dissatisfaction with them.
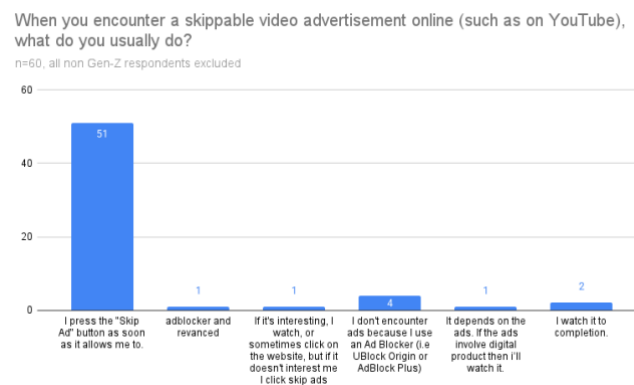

Figure 4. A chart of the 61 respondents' response on what they'd do if they encountered a skippable ad.
source: author's documentation, October 2025

To strengthen the assertion made regarding Generation-Z's dissatisfaction with advertising, it was found that the vast majority of the respondents (83.60%) are highly likely to immediately press the skip button the moment they are allowed to on platforms such as YouTube, with the rest of the responses (0.08%) mentioning that they do not encounter ads due to the use of an ad-blocker, and only a tiny minority (0.06% of respondents) opting to watch an ad to completion, with some respondents in the last category only watching them if they find the ad relevant to their needs or tastes, further strengthening the secondary data provided in the introduction passage.

An optional to answer qualitative long answer form was provided after this question for respondents who wished to elaborate further on why they feel this way to the question "Are you likely to buy a product you see in the ads you see online?"

No	Name of Respondent (Initials), Age, & Birth Sex	Domicile	If you are willing to elaborate, why do you feel this way?
1	M.C.A, 21 years old, male	*Surabaya, Indonesia*	Whenever I see an ad, I always have this gut feeling to not trust them. Especially if they're integrated sponsors on YouTube.
2	R.M, 18 years old, preferred not to mention their birth sex	*Melbourne, Australia*	A lot of the ads I get aren't really relevant to my interests, so very few of them are actually products I would be interested in. There have been ads advertising/promoting things I'm interested in though!
3	K.B, 20 years old, female	*Surabaya, Indonesia*	Often, because they are disturbing my scrolling time, they start off with negative on the affection meter, making me less inclined to buy their product.
4	M, 20 years old, female	*Semarang, Indonesia*	Sometimes I feel like the algorithm misunderstood me and keep giving me ads I don't like or unrelated to me, and finding the ones I like are pretty rare.
5	M.J, 18 years old, male	*Muntinlupa, Philippines*	Most of the ads I see online are things that either I can't afford, or things that I don't want to buy.

Table 1. A table of responses explaining why they don't buy products they see in ads. source: author's documentation (2025)

The selected responses highlight a pattern of general distrust and disdain towards online advertisements, as the respondents felt that most of the ads they encounter online are either irrelevant to their personal needs, bothersome, infringes on their free time, or that they can't afford the products being advertised. This indicates that not only do the sampled respondents find the ads they view *irrelevant* to their

personal tastes, but they also express some form of negative emotional response to seeing them, with only some of the respondents expressing interest in buying the products they see in times the advertising is relevant to their needs or tastes.

To strengthen this argument, a response from D.Z.L from the same question states the following: "If the ads that appear are specifically game ads, or ads that aren't "useful" in my life and they keep popping up, it's annoying. I always find ways to avoid them, such as installing an ad blocker, or even completely abandoning apps with too many ads. But sometimes if the ads are for technology or useful items, I can *tolerate* them." At the very best of cases where the viewer's interest was piqued, traditional advertising methods are only tolerated but still found to be annoying by the generation, even if the product being advertised is considered relevant to their hobbies or needs.

What makes a brand authentic to this generation?

On the topic of authenticity and what Gen-Z perceives to be authentic, the question "Which of the following actions make a brand or influencer feel more authentic to you?" was asked to the respondents with a "select all that applies" format and an option for a custom response, with the following results:
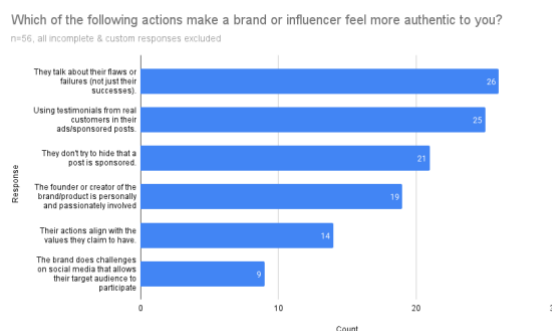

Figure 5. A chart of the 56 respondents' responses on what makes a brand or influencer feel more authentic.
source: author's documentation, October 2025

A significant majority of the response's values transparency as a form of a brand or influencer's authenticity, as the top 3 responses chosen by the respondents primarily relate to transparency (using real testimonials from real customers, openly talking about their failures, & not hiding that a post is sponsored). This data allows the conclusion of transparency being one of the definitions or ways of being authentic according to this generation.

To further deepen understanding about what values Generation-Z wishes brands would uphold, a question was asked using the same format as the previous one: "When you decide to follow or purchase from a brand, which of the following is most important to you?", with the following responses:
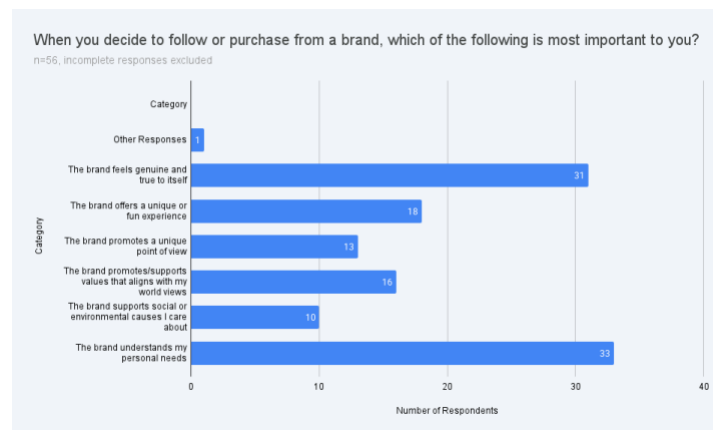

Figure 6. A chart of the 56 respondents' responses on what is most important factors when deciding to follow or purchase from a brand.
source: author's documentation, October 2025

The top responses indicates that Generation-Z seeks brands that:

1. Are genuine to themselves;
2. Understands their personal needs;
3. Offers a fun and unique experience;
4. Supports values that align with their world views

What kind of campaigns resonate with them, and why?

At the end of the survey, respondents who are willing to answer are asked the optional question: "If you're willing to share, what are some brand marketing campaigns you think did something authentic?" This question was asked to further

deepen the qualitative understanding of what brands have done it "right" in the eyes of Generation-Z.

No	Name of Respondent (Initials), Age, & Birth Sex	Domicile	What are some brand marketing campaigns you think did something authentic?
1	H.R.G, 21 years old, male	Surabaya, Indonesia	I think any uniqlo campaigns excel [at] it. They promote what they are not what they are trying to be. And the way they always include photoshoot with people that's not too overmodeled like zara or any fast fashion chain but kept it natural and simple is what sells me.
2	D.A, 21 years old, female	Surabaya, Indonesia	Collaboration. It tends to connect with us gen-z. Such as Harry Potter, KATSEYE and GAP, or kpop idols x food brands (mcd new jeans, tos tos bonedo, enhypen nabati, etc). The more related artists or things with gen-z, the more I'm willing to bought something out of curiosity! Especially when it comes to my favorite idols! Even if I know there's no chance for getting the merch (luck based) for me, just to think about having them excites me!

3	M.C.A, 21 years old, male	Surabaya, Indonesia	I think Duolingo is doing a really good job at marketing to Gen Zers, really playing into the whole meme culture without it feeling forced. I think it's because they've been able to fully embrace the meme, rather than deny it. It feels like there's a casual conversation between us, the audience and them as a brand. Making them really engaging to me.
4	M.A, 21 years old, male	Surabaya, Indonesia	Prada on Sabrina Carpenter's MV featuring their products are hott! It's not just how she carries/features the product but also how she effortlessly features it. Also, weeks ago, I'm also attached to Genz's style marketing of Loewe. They use memes and other comedy genres to make their target related to their marketing.
5	R.M, 18 years old, preferred not to mention their birth sex	Melbourne, Australia	Tony's Chocolonely and its aim to speak up against the exploitation in the cocoa industry is a good example of authentic marketing, especially since a lot of

			brands out there dont ever actively talk about topics like those (again exploitation, slavery, etc)
6	G.H, 21 years old, male	Surabaya, Indonesia	Menurut saya *campaign* yang menarik salah satunya LEGO (ads dimana ada Tom Holland), dimana sang *brand* bisa menunjukkan bagaimana mainannya cocok untuk semua kalangan umur. Translation: In my opinion, an interesting campaign is by LEGO (where they feature Tom Holland), where the brand can show how its toys are compatible for all age groups.

Table 2. A table of a few responses explaining what marketing campaigns they perceive to be authentic.
source: author's documentation (2025)

The qualitative answers from the respondents are consistent with their previous answers, in which they prefer brands that are true to themselves, one that understands them, and one that offers a fun experience. Based on the responses, it can be inferred that Generation-Z is happy when brands market to them in an authentic & relatable manner by performing collaborations with high profile celebrities (with K-Pop groups or even high profile actors such as Tom Holland, as highlighted from G.H's response) or by simply being relatable to them by understanding what they like and prefer, as highlighted by M.C.A's response in regards to Duolingo's marketing strategy, where he prefers when brands communicate with their consumers in a way that feels like a casual conversation. D.A in particular expresses enthusiasm when brands perform collaborations with other brands or high profile celebrities, especially ones they are interested in.

She even expresses more willingness to purchase products with the full awareness that she might not obtain what she wants (in cases of luck based merchandise) when purchasing products that are a result of brand collaborations.

Other responses highlight appreciation when a brand remains true to their branding, such as with H.R.G's appreciation towards Uniqlo for "promoting what they *are*, not what they are *trying* to be" while calling out the clothing brand Zara for being "overmodeled" in his perspective. A response from R.M expresses appreciation towards a brand when they decide to actively fight against exploitation, such as Tony's Chocolonely's efforts to combat exploitation in the cocoa industry, signifying care towards issues of social justice.

Defining Authenticity According to Generation-Z

From all the above data, a clear definition can be formed on what *indexical authenticity* is to Generation-Z. This authenticity can be summarized into 3 key words: **relatability**, **transparency**, and **shared values**.
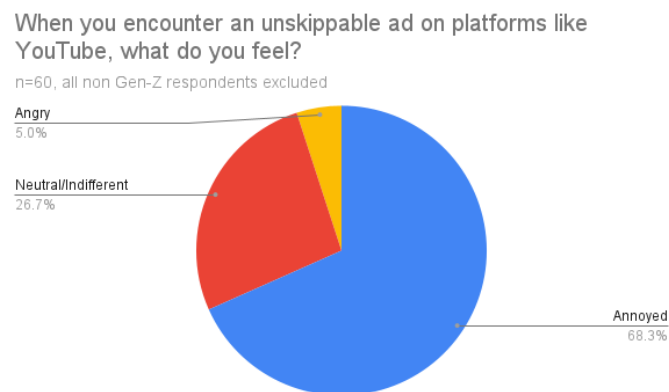

Figure 6. A chart of the 60 respondents' responses on what they feel when encountering unskippable ads.
source: author's documentation, October 2025

First, authenticity can be achieved through relatable and non-intrusive engagement. This is proven from qualitative data on Table 1 that indicates this generation's rejection on advertising that infringes on their free time, especially in cases of unskippable video advertisements commonly found on platforms such as

YouTube. According to the figure above, a significant majority (68.3%) of surveyed Generation-Z finds annoying when asked to define their feelings into either anger, neutral/indifference, annoyance, happiness, or interest. The results signify mostly displeasure, with respondents expressing neither happiness nor interest. At the very least, 26.7% of respondents expressing indifference merely tolerate the ads rather than being remotely engaged or interested in it.

Second, quantitative data obtained from the optional long answer forms confirms that transparency is a non-negotiable component of authenticity in the eyes of Generation-Z. Figures 7 & 8 shows a clear preference for brands that are "genuine to themselves" and those that are transparent about their operations.

How much do you agree with this statement: "I am more likely to support a brand that is transparent about its business practices and admits its mistakes when it gets involved in a controversy."
n=51, incomplete responses excluded

Figure 7. A chart of the 51 respondents' responses on what is most important factors when deciding to follow or purchase from a brand.
source: author's documentation, October 2025

This argument is clearly corroborated by answers from the above data from a question specifically asking respondents to rate their agreement on a statement on a Likert scale regarding brand transparency. A majority (64.70%) of respondents who answered agreed on some level with the statement, with 27.45% expressing neutrality and 0.08% expressing disagreement.

Finally, the perception of being authentic is obtained through shared worldviews and values. As highlighted by R.M's appreciation for Tony's Chocolonely's advocacy against exploitation and 16 respondents in Figure 8, a brand's willingness

to "speak out against social injustice" serves as a powerful signal of its genuine values. This act is interpreted as a core part of the brand's identity, not just a marketing tactic. It aligns the brand with the consumer's own moral compass, cementing a connection that a traditional, product-focused marketing campaign is incapable of achieving, strengthening the data obtained from the survey.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to investigate the underlying reasoning for Generation-Z's rejection of traditional advertising and to define why this demographic increasingly prefers campaigns perceived as "indexically authentic". This study strengthens the assertion made that this generation rejects traditional marketing. It is not only a passive but also an active emotional response driven by distrust, being unable to relate, and the perception that the advertising they encounter are annoying and infringes on their free time. As a result of this disconnect between marketers and the generation, Generation-Z has embraced a new definition of authenticity, which this research concludes that *indexical authenticity* in the view of this generation consists of three fundamental pillars: relatability, transparency, and shared values.

First, authenticity can be achieved through relatable and non-intrusive engagement, meaning advertisers should stop using unskippable advertisements in their marketing strategy. Qualitative data has praised brands like Duolingo for engaging with meme culture "without it feeling forced," creating a casual conversation with their target audience/market rather than an advertisement or a brand simply trying to sell a product.

Second, the findings show that transparency is a non-negotiable component of indexical authenticity. This is overwhelmingly supported with data, where the top actions perceived as Generation-Z to be indexically authentic includes a brand talking about their flaws or failures, which is proven with 64.70% of respondents agreeing to support brands that are transparent and admits to their mistakes when

caught up in controversy, and that brands are transparent when it comes to paid sponsorships or promotions.

Finally, indexical authenticity is cemented through shared worldviews. Generation-Z seeks brands that align with their moral compass by supporting/upholding their values and speaking out on social issues, such as the example of Tony's Chocolonely's advocacy against exploitation in the cocoa industry.

The implications of these findings can prove useful for marketers and designers, as they suggest that to resonate with Generation-Z, brands must fundamentally shift from interruptive & one-way messaging to building trust through proven transparency and demonstrating a genuine identity, one true to that brand and marketing that allows the target audience of that brand to participate in that campaign.

The study's primary limitation is its sampling, as the sample size is not only relatively small, but the respondents are mostly urbanites residing in big cities in Indonesia, meaning that the results cannot be generalized globally despite the researcher's effort to sample respondents from western countries. Furthermore, there was a slight oversampling of female respondents, leading to limited generalizability on the perspectives of men. However, the results should in some way be able to represent the views of Indonesian urbanite Generation-Z individuals towards advertising and authenticity, making the findings somewhat relevant in the hands of Indonesian marketers or Indonesian designers.

Further research is recommended to use a larger, more globally diverse sample to validate the three-pillar definition of indexical authenticity this article presents and whether it holds true across different cultural contexts, especially in the context of cultures which have more westernized values.

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