

Beyond Content Format: Explaining Generation Z Purchase Decisions through Emotional Engagement, Authenticity, Trust, and Purchase Intention

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how storytelling and hard-selling content influence purchase decisions among 120 Generation Z social-media users in Banjarmasin, Indonesia. Using a quantitative cross-sectional survey and purposive sampling, the study found that storytelling content positively predicted purchase decisions [(B = 0.695, β = 0.599, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.358$)]. Hard-selling content also had a positive effect [(B = 0.625, β = 0.611, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.373$)]. However, no significant difference was found between the two formats [($p = 0.804$)]. The findings suggest that Generation Z combines emotional and rational evaluations in social-media purchasing decisions. Emotional engagement, authenticity, trust, and purchase intention are proposed as mechanisms for future research. Marketers should combine authentic storytelling with clear product information.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an important environment for product discovery, brand evaluation, and consumer decision making. Digital marketing is no longer limited to delivering product information; it increasingly involves creating experiences, interactions, and meanings that consumers associate with brands. This shift is particularly relevant for Generation Z, who have grown up with mobile technology, social networking platforms, visual communication, and immediate access to information.

Indonesia's expanding digital environment reinforces the importance of social-media marketing. The source study reports that internet penetration in Indonesia reached 80.66% in 2025, representing more than 229 million users. This development has strengthened the role of social-media platforms in product search, brand interaction, and purchase-related decision making. Banjarmasin, as an urban economic center in South Kalimantan, provides a relevant setting for understanding consumer responses to social-media content in an emerging-market context.

Two common social-media content formats are storytelling content and hard-selling content. Storytelling communicates a brand message through narratives, experiences, emotional cues, and values. Hard-selling content uses direct persuasion through product features, benefits, prices, promotions, and calls to action. These formats represent different communication logics: storytelling is generally associated with affective and relational processing, whereas hard selling is associated with cognitive and informational processing.

The original study found that storytelling content and hard-selling content both positively influenced purchase decisions among 120 Generation Z respondents in Banjarmasin. Nevertheless, their overall effectiveness did not differ significantly. This finding suggests that the decision process of Generation Z cannot be reduced to a preference for either emotional narratives or direct promotion. Instead, both content formats may affect purchase decisions through different psychological routes.

This study contributes by positioning the direct empirical results within a broader mechanism-based framework. It examines the direct effects of storytelling and hard-selling content on purchase decision and proposes emotional engagement, perceived authenticity, trust, and purchase intention as mechanisms for future empirical testing. The study asks whether storytelling content and hard-selling content influence Generation Z purchase decisions and whether the two content formats differ significantly in perceived effectiveness..

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stimulus-organism-response framework

The stimulus-organism-response framework explains that environmental stimuli shape internal psychological states, which subsequently lead to behavioral responses. In this study, storytelling and hard-selling content represent marketing stimuli. Emotional engagement, perceived authenticity, trust, and purchase intention constitute potential organismic responses, while purchase decision represents the behavioral response. This framework is useful

because it distinguishes content exposure from the psychological processes that may translate exposure into purchase-related behavior.

Storytelling content and purchase decision

Storytelling marketing conveys brand messages through narratives that can be attractive, understandable, relevant, emotionally engaging, authentic, and memorable. In the source study, storytelling content was operationalized through attractive story flow, message clarity, audience relevance, emotional involvement, authenticity, and product recall. Narrative content may help consumers connect product information with experiences and values, thereby strengthening favorable purchase-related responses.

H1: Storytelling content positively affects Generation Z purchase decisions.

Hard-selling content and purchase decision. Hard-selling content delivers explicit and persuasive product communication through direct information, emphasized benefits, prices or promotions, calls to action, product advantages, and promotional intensity. Such content can reduce uncertainty and facilitate a consumer's evaluation of product value. The source study measured hard selling through these direct informational and promotional dimensions.

H2: Hard-selling content positively affects Generation Z purchase decisions.

Mechanism-based explanation. Storytelling is expected to activate affective responses. A relevant and sincere story may produce emotional engagement and perceived authenticity, which may subsequently strengthen trust and purchase intention. By contrast, hard-selling content is expected to facilitate a cognitive route because clear product information, price cues, and promotional value can support consumer evaluation. The present dataset does not independently measure emotional engagement, authenticity, trust, or purchase intention. Therefore, the following propositions are theoretical and require separate empirical testing in future work.

P1: Emotional engagement mediates the relationship between storytelling content and purchase intention.

P2: Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between storytelling content and trust.

P3: Trust positively affects purchase intention, which subsequently affects purchase decision.

P4: Perceived informativeness mediates the relationship between hard-selling content and purchase intention.

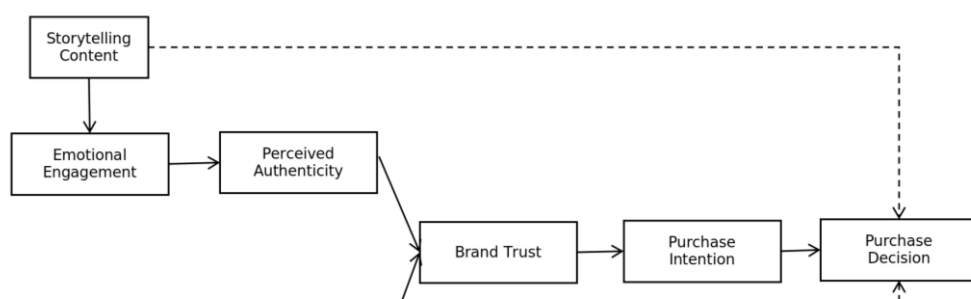




Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative explanatory and comparative survey design. The study was cross-sectional because the data were collected at one point in time. It was also ex post facto because respondents evaluated naturally encountered social-media marketing content rather than receiving experimental manipulation.

The population consisted of Generation Z consumers living in Banjarmasin who actively use social media and have been exposed to promotional content. Purposive sampling was used. Respondents had to belong to Generation Z, reside in Banjarmasin, actively use social-media platforms such as TikTok or Instagram, and have previously encountered storytelling and hard-selling marketing content. A total of 120 complete and valid questionnaires were analyzed.

The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Storytelling content was measured with six items: attractive story flow, message clarity, relevance, emotional involvement, authenticity, and product recall. Hard-selling content was measured with six items: direct product information, product benefits, price or promotion, call to action, product advantage, and promotional intensity. Purchase decision was measured with six items: product interest, intention to buy, confidence in selecting the product, purchasing decision, willingness to recommend, and repurchase intention.

Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics. The stages included descriptive analysis, Pearson product-moment validity testing, Cronbach's alpha reliability testing, assumption testing, simple linear regression, and paired-sample t-test. The significance threshold was set at 0.05.

RESEARCH RESULT

Instrument quality. All items were valid because their item-total correlations exceeded the critical r-value of 0.179. Storytelling item correlations

ranged from 0.546 to 0.716, hard-selling item correlations ranged from 0.661 to 0.695, and purchase-decision item correlations ranged from 0.628 to 0.744. The three constructs also showed strong internal consistency.

Table 1. Reliability Test Results

Construct	Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Storytelling Content	6	0.832	Highly reliable
Hard-Selling Content	6	0.873	Highly reliable
Purchase Decision	6	0.891	Highly reliable
Overall Instrument	18	0.927	Highly reliable

Descriptive results. Respondents rated both content formats positively. Hard-selling content had a slightly higher average score than storytelling content, while the purchase-decision score was moderately high.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variable	Mean Score	Interpretation
Storytelling Content	3.95	High
Hard-Selling Content	3.97	High
Purchase Decision	3.56	Moderately high

For storytelling content, message clarity was the highest-rated item ($M = 4.23$), followed by attractive story flow ($M = 4.19$). Product recall through story-based content was the lowest-rated item ($M = 3.72$). For hard-selling content, direct product information was rated highest ($M = 4.21$), followed by direct explanation of product benefits ($M = 4.19$). The direct call to action item was the lowest-rated hard-selling element ($M = 3.55$).

Table 3. Regression Results for Storytelling Content and Purchase Decision

Predictor	B	β	t	p
Constant	4.899	–	2.375	0.019
Storytelling Content	0.695	0.599	8.120	<0.001

The storytelling model was significant ($F = 65.935$, $p < 0.001$), with $R = 0.599$, $R^2 = 0.358$, and adjusted $R^2 = 0.353$. Storytelling content positively and significantly predicted purchase decision. Thus, H1 was supported.

Table 4. Regression Results for Hard-Selling Content and Purchase Decision

Predictor	B	β	t	p
Constant	6.501	–	3.587	<0.001
Hard-Selling Content	0.625	0.611	8.383	<0.001

The hard-selling model was significant ($F = 70.281$, $p < 0.001$), with $R = 0.611$, $R^2 = 0.373$, and adjusted $R^2 = 0.368$. Hard-selling content positively and significantly predicted purchase decision. Thus, H2 was supported.

Table 5. Paired-Sample t-Test Results

Content Type	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	t	df	p
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Storytelling Content	23.71	4.445	-0.092	-0.249	119	0.804
Hard-Selling Content	23.80	5.044	-	-	-	-

The paired-sample t-test found no significant difference between storytelling and hard-selling content ($p = 0.804$). Thus, the evidence does not support a conclusion that one content format is generally more effective than the other for the sampled Generation Z consumers.

DISCUSSION

The positive effect of storytelling content supports the proposition that narrative communication is useful in social-media marketing. Storytelling may make a brand message more meaningful by linking product information with familiar experiences, values, and emotions. The high ratings for message clarity and attractive story flow indicate that consumers value narratives that are coherent and easy to understand, not only narratives that are emotionally appealing.

The result also provides a foundation for the proposed affective route. Emotional involvement and message authenticity were included in the original storytelling measurement, showing that these themes are salient to respondents' evaluations. Nevertheless, they were not measured as independent latent constructs. The current evidence therefore supports their conceptual relevance but cannot establish their statistical mediation.

Hard-selling content also positively influenced purchase decision. This finding demonstrates that Generation Z does not reject direct promotional communication. The strong evaluation of direct product information and product benefits suggests that respondents still require concrete information before making purchase-related decisions. Direct information may decrease uncertainty, facilitate comparison, and clarify whether a product meets their needs.

The lowest mean for the direct call-to-action item shows an important nuance. Consumers may appreciate informative promotion but remain cautious toward messages that feel overly pressuring. This implies that hard selling should be clear and useful rather than aggressive. Promotional content should explain benefits, prices, availability, and purchasing procedures while preserving a tone that does not undermine consumers' sense of autonomy.

The absence of a significant difference between the two formats indicates that Generation Z purchase decisions reflect a combination of affective and cognitive processing. Storytelling may contribute through relevance, emotional engagement, and authenticity; hard selling may contribute through information, value cues, and decision support. Rather than positioning the formats as substitutes, marketers should use them as complementary content components.

A practical illustration is a short social-media video that begins with a relatable consumer problem, presents an authentic experience, and then briefly explains the product benefit, price, promotion, and purchase route. Such a design can combine storytelling's capacity to attract attention and build connection with hard selling's capacity to facilitate evaluation and conversion.

The proposed mechanism model extends the present results. Future evidence should test whether storytelling affects purchase intention through emotional engagement and perceived authenticity, then through trust. Hard-selling content may be examined through perceived informativeness before it influences trust and purchase intention. These pathways should be tested only after each construct is measured independently using validated multi-item scales.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study shows that storytelling content and hard-selling content both positively influence the purchase decisions of Generation Z social-media users in Banjarmasin. Storytelling content had a significant positive effect ($B = 0.695$; $R^2 = 0.358$), while hard-selling content also had a significant positive effect ($B = 0.625$; $R^2 = 0.373$). The paired comparison found no statistically significant difference in their perceived effectiveness ($p = 0.804$).

The findings indicate that Generation Z purchase decisions involve both emotional and rational considerations. Storytelling can support relevance, engagement, and authenticity, while hard selling can offer the information, benefits, and promotion cues that consumers need for product evaluation. Businesses should therefore avoid treating the two approaches as mutually exclusive.

Practitioners are recommended to use authentic storytelling to create attention and emotional connection, then provide concise product information and non-intrusive calls to action to support consumer evaluation. Small and medium-sized enterprises can use this integrated approach on TikTok, Instagram, and comparable social-media platforms to communicate more effectively with Generation Z audiences.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design does not permit definitive causal inference, the purposive sample of 120 respondents limits generalizability, and all measures are self-reported. In addition, the study did not separately measure emotional engagement, perceived authenticity, trust, perceived informativeness, or purchase intention. Although these constructs are central to the theoretical title and framework, the present dataset cannot test their direct or mediating effects.

Future research should collect new data using independent multi-item measures for emotional engagement, authenticity, trust, purchase intention, perceived informativeness, and purchase decision. A sample of approximately 250–400 respondents is recommended for structural equation modeling. A between-subject online experiment, in which participants are randomly assigned to equivalent storytelling or hard-selling stimuli for the same product, would offer stronger causal evidence. Future studies can also compare platforms, product categories, local and national brands, or regions across Indonesia and other emerging markets.

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