

# Gen Z's Behavior Towards Digital Culinary Brands on TikTok

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**Abstract:** This study aims to explore the behavioral dynamics of Generation Z (Gen Z) toward digital culinary brands on TikTok, a platform increasingly central to youth consumer engagement. The research investigates how Gen Z interacts with, interprets, and forms relationships with culinary content in a digital environment shaped by algorithmic trends and participatory culture. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 Gen Z participants aged 18–24 years who actively engage with culinary brand content on TikTok. Additional data were obtained from observational analysis of brand-related content and user interactions on the platform. Thematic analysis revealed three core themes: emotional engagement with sensory-rich food content, digital consumption as identity performance, and expectations of brand authenticity and interactivity. Participants expressed strong affective responses to visually appealing and immersive content, linked their brand preferences to personal values and social identity, and favored brands that demonstrated responsiveness, humor, and human-like interaction. These findings highlight the role of TikTok not only as a marketing tool but as a cultural space where brand perception and loyalty are socially constructed. This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of consumer engagement by situating Gen Z's behavior within a sociocultural and digital framework. Practically, it offers insights for culinary brands to develop more authentic, interactive, and value-driven content strategies. The findings also suggest implications for digital marketing policies and content regulation. Future research is recommended to explore cross-platform behaviors and cultural variations in digital brand engagement.

**Keywords:** Gen Z, TikTok, digital culinary brands

## 1. Introduction

In the era of massive digital transformation, social media has undergone a significant functional shift—from merely serving as a communication space to becoming a strategic medium within the marketing ecosystem. One of the dominant platforms in this landscape is TikTok, a short-form video application that has become central in studies on consumer behavior, particularly among younger generations. TikTok not only serves as a medium for creative expression but also radically transforms the patterns of interaction between consumers and brands, including within the digital culinary industry.

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Business sustainability requires thorough preparation, including in the telecommunications sector. Interestingly, this industry presents great opportunities for new players to enter and compete. This is evidenced by the emergence of many new mobile operators in the market. The growing number of players indicates a high level of attractiveness in the industry. Furthermore, globalization has integrated the world more closely, dissolving national boundaries and expanding the scope of market opportunities across regions.

Globally, more than 1 billion TikTok users are active every month, and about 60% of them are Gen Z, known as digital natives who are highly adaptive to new technologies . In Indonesia, the value of e-commerce transactions on TikTok Shop quadrupled in 2022, reaching more than USD 4.4 billion . This trend signals a shift in consumer shopping behavior and content-centric engagement.

The importance of post-purchase satisfaction requires sellers to present accurate claims that genuinely reflect the quality of their products or services. Companies can take proactive steps to reduce post-purchase dissatisfaction by delivering superior product performance and consumer experiences.

This phenomenon is especially evident in the culinary sector. TikTok accounts that feature food reviews, street food content, and viral recipes have significantly driven order spikes and brand loyalty—even in the absence of direct experience. In this context, engagement involves more than passive actions such as viewing or liking content; it encompasses purchasing decisions, participation in discussions, and user-generated content reproduction.

Gen Z, as key actors in this dynamic, show a preference for brands that are interactive, authentic, and visually engaging. They are more responsive to user-generated content (UGC) and influencer marketing than to traditional promotional forms. In previous qualitative studies, Salwanisa & Wikartika, (2023) found that Gen Z searched for information through TikTok before deciding to buy food products, and they placed more value on honest reviews from other users.

However, most of the existing literature still focuses on quantitative aspects such as frequency of interactions, likes, and views . Few studies have deeply explored the meaning-making processes, subjective experiences, and emotional dynamics of consumers engaging with culinary brands on TikTok, particularly within the Indonesian cultural context. This creates a crucial knowledge gap to be addressed through qualitative inquiry.

Furthermore, Gen Z's engagement with digital culinary brands on TikTok is shaped by digital culture, which emphasizes speed, visualization, and connectivity. TikTok's algorithm customizes content based on user preferences, producing hyper-personalized media consumption experiences. In this setting, digital culinary narratives become embedded in expressions of identity and lifestyle .

Indonesia's sociocultural context is also distinct, combining urban dynamism with communal values. In this setting, recommendations from friends, online communities, and comment interactions significantly influence brand perception. Studi oleh Putra et al., (2025) highlights the importance of interactivity in fostering Gen Z loyalty toward digital food brands.

As a socio-cultural phenomenon, Gen Z's engagement on platforms like TikTok is also tied to how they shape identity, participate in trends, and seek social validation. From this perspective, consumers are not passive recipients but active agents who co-create brand value through personal narratives and digital interaction.

The objective of this study is to explore the meaning of Gen Z consumer engagement with digital culinary brands on TikTok through a qualitative approach. The research focuses on forms of engagement, motivations, emotional experiences, and the interpretative processes involved in consuming and disseminating culinary content. Theoretically, this study contributes to expanding discourses on consumer engagement in interactive social media, and supports the development of experience-based digital marketing communication theories. Practically, the findings may guide culinary entrepreneurs in designing content strategies that are relevant, inclusive, and resonant with Gen Z audiences.

This study employs a phenomenological approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with Gen Z participants who actively use TikTok to access culinary content. This method seeks to uncover not just what is happening, but how and why such engagement occurs in a dynamic digital context.

By addressing the limited exploration of Gen Z's experiential and perceptual dimensions in the context of digital culinary branding on TikTok, this study aims to fill that gap with a rich and context-sensitive narrative. Through this approach, the research captures the complex dynamics of engagement that are often hidden behind numerical metrics.

## **2. Preliminaries or Related Work or Literature Review**

### **2.1. Digital Consumer Behavior Theory**

This theory explains that behavioral intentions are determined by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In the digital context, many studies have adapted the TPB to explain consumer behavior in e-commerce, social media, and digital food marketing. Amien et al., (2024) using the TPB approach in virtual reality to test consumer intent towards CSR communication on social media. They affirm the importance of emotional involvement and perceptual control in directing behavioral intent.

### **2.2 Digital Emotional Engagement Theory**

This concept emphasizes that emotional engagement is an essential element in digital consumer engagement. This theory is rooted in hedonistic experiences and deep affection for brands on online platforms. Chen, X., Jiang, Y., & Wang, (2021) suggests that emotionally charged content (playful, relatable) is more likely to drive user interaction and engagement. Amitrano et al., (2021) adopts Mollen & Wilson's approach to explaining customer engagement in the context of digital experiences through interactive media.

### **2.3 Social Identity Theory in Social Media**

This theory highlights how social identities are formed and reinforced through group affiliation on social media. Consumers show loyalty not only based on product values, but also group identification (e.g.: TikTok foodie community). Farhat, et al, (2021) Linking social identity to digital engagement and brand loyalty on social platforms.

Companies that have competence in the fields of marketing, manufacturing and innovation can make its as a source to achieve competitive advantage (Daengs GS, et al. 2020:1419). The research design is a plan to determine the resources and data that will be used to be processed

in order to answer the research question. (Asep Iwa Soemantri, 2020:5). Standard of the company demands regarding the results or output produced are intended to develop the company. (Istanti, Enny, 2021:560). Time management skills can facilitate the implementation of the work and plans outlined. (Rina Dewi, et al. 2020:14). Saat mengumpulkan sumber data, peneliti mengumpulkan sumber data berupa data mentah. Metode survei adalah metode pengumpulan data primer dengan menggunakan pertanyaan tertulis (Kumala Dewi, Indri et al, 2022 : 29).

### **3. Proposed Method**

#### **3.1. Research Approach**

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a phenomenological strategy. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it aims to understand the meaning of subjective experiences experienced by Gen Z individuals in consuming and shaping digital culinary culture through TikTok. Phenomenology is relevant when researchers want to explore the deep meaning of social experiences based on social media platforms such as TikTok.

#### **3.2. Research Location and Time**

This research was conducted online-based with data collection locations spread across Indonesia through digital exploration, online interviews, and TikTok content observation. The time of the study was carried out between January and May 2025, taking into account the seasonal trends of culinary campaigns on TikTok.

#### **3.3. Participants and Sampling Techniques**

The subjects of this study are individuals from generation Z aged 17–26 years who actively follow digital culinary brand accounts on TikTok. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling with high engagement criteria (frequently interacting, commenting, or re-uploading culinary brand content). If the initial network is limited, the snowball sampling technique is applied to expand the network of respondents that correspond to the phenomenological focus (Hair, J. F., et al, 2023).

#### **3.4 Data Collection Techniques**

The data was collected through two main techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews and netnographic observations of TikTok content. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and Google Meet, recorded with the permission of the informant. Netnography is carried out by observing the interaction of comments, the use of hashtags, and videos featuring culinary brands. Netnography observations on TikTok allowed researchers to capture cultural practices in an organic and unstructured way.

#### **3.5 Ethical Procedures**

The researcher ensures the application of research ethical principles with written informed consent before the interview begins, protection of anonymity through the use of codes or pseudonyms, and transparency of the use of data for academic purposes only. This is in accordance with the ethical guidelines recommended in digital qualitative studies

#### **3.6 Data Validation Techniques**

To increase the credibility of the data, triangulation of sources and methods is used, namely comparing data from interviews, observation results, and documentation (video screenshots, comments). In addition, member checking was carried out by sending transcripts of interpretation results to participants to obtain clarification of the meaning

### 3.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method according to Braun & Clarke (2006) in six stages: (1) familiarization, (2) initial coding, (3) theme search, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition, and (6) reporting. The analysis is done inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data, rather than previous theories.

### 3.8 Data Documentation and Management

All interviews are recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed with the help of *NVivo software* to assist with the coding and categorization process of the theme. Observations and results of netnography documentation are systematically stored in an encrypted directory to ensure data security.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Results

The results of this study reveal three main themes that describe Gen Z's behavior towards digital culinary brands on TikTok, namely: (1) *Emotional Engagement with Culinary Content*, (2) *Identity Representation through Digital Consumption*, and (3) *Expectations for Brand Authenticity and Interactivity*. These three themes were obtained through in-depth interviews with 12 Gen Z participants (aged 18–24 years) who actively follow culinary brand accounts on TikTok, accompanied by content observations and interactions on the platform.

**Theme 1: Emotional Engagement with Culinary Content** The majority of participants showed high engagement with culinary content that was aesthetic, appetizing, and visually pleasing. Content featuring *street food*, cooking processes, or ASMR sounds of food gets a strong emotional response. One participant stated:

*"Sometimes I'm not hungry, but when I see street food videos on TikTok, I immediately feel like buying them. Not just because of the food, but because of the atmosphere."* (P3, female, 21 years old)

This engagement not only reflects a momentary response, but it also influences a purchase decision or recommendation to a friend.

**Theme 2: Identity Representation through Digital Consumption** For Gen Z, following certain culinary brands on TikTok is not only about food, but also a form of social identity and lifestyle expression. They choose to follow brands that are *relatable*, close to their values or lifestyle, such as locality, sustainability, or uniqueness of concepts. For example, one participant said:

*"I really like brands that have a local food concept but are made aesthetically. So I just feel proud, like 'this is my style'."* (P7, male, 22 years old)

The act of *sharing, liking, and dueting* with brand content is part of the strategy to form a digital self-image.

**Theme 3: Expectations for Brand Authenticity and Interactivity** Participants showed sensitivity to brands that appear "fake" or too commercial. Brands that are considered successful are those that present *authentic storytelling*, show the behind-the-scenes process, and respond to comments or create challenges that engage the audience. One participant affirmed:

*"I prefer brands that are human-like, not robotic. They respond to comments, use humor, sometimes even follow the trend as well."* (P5, female, 19 years old)

This reinforces the importance of brand interactivity and humanization in building a long-term connection with Gen Z.

## 4.2 Discussion

The above findings show that Gen Z's behavior towards culinary brands on TikTok cannot be understood solely as a consumption process, but rather as a social practice involving emotions, identity, and digital relationships. This strengthens the theory of *Consumer Engagement* (Brodie et al., 2011) which states that consumer engagement on social media includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects. In this context, Gen Z engagement is not just about food consumption, but imaginative experiences that are built from the visual and cultural content of the TikTok platform.

In addition, these findings are in line with *Social Identity Theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) in which Gen Z forms social identity through a preference for brands that represent certain values or groups. The decision to follow or promote a digital culinary brand is often driven by a desire to show who they are in the digital realm.

Comparison with previous research (Misra & Dangi, 2022; Chae, 2021) shows the similarities that Gen Z is looking for *authentic brands*, but this study offers a new perspective in the culinary context and the role of TikTok as a visual and emotional mediator. Different from previous social media, TikTok allows the exploration of non-verbal narrative styles such as music, facial expressions, and short visual storytelling that have a strong impact on brand perception.

The practical implications of this study are the importance of digital culinary brands to understand the characteristics of the TikTok platform and the emotional needs of Gen Z. Branding strategies that emphasize authenticity, emotional closeness, and community participation are key to success. Theoretically, these findings expand the framework of understanding young consumer behavior in the era of visual algorithms and viral culture.

The limitations of this study lie in the coverage of the dominant participants from urban areas and the limitations of observation on certain types of content. Further research can explore Gen Z's behavior outside of big cities, as well as deepen analysis of the dynamics of comments and discussions on the TikTok platform as a form of discursive engagement.

The Research model or framework is intended to further clarify the essence of the discussion of previous research result and the theoretical basis in the research, including the relationship between influential variables. (Enny Istanti, et al. 2024 : 150). This research will be conducted in three phases : measurement model (external model), structural model (internal model), and hypothesis testing. (Pramono Budi,et al., 2023 ; 970). Melalui proses tersebut, karyawan diberikan pelatihan dan pengembangan yang relevan dengan kinerja pekerjaannya, sehingga diharapkan dapat menjalankan tanggung jawab pekerjaannya dengan sebaik - baiknya. (Abdul Aziz Sholeh et.al. 2024 :82). Memilih merupakan bagian dari suatu upaya pemecahan sekaligus sebagai bagian dari proses pengambilan keputusan. Oleh karena itu dibutuhkan keputusan pembelian yang tepat (Kristiawati Indriana et.al. 2019 : 28). Kerja sama antara pemerintah, industri, lembaga penelitian dan masyarakat sipil dalam merancang menerapkan, Komitmen dan kerja sama yang kuat dari seluruh pemangku kepentingan menjadi kunci keberhasilan upaya - upaya tersebut. (Gazali Salim et al. 2024 : 63)

The SERVQUAL model includes calculating the difference between the values given by customers for each pair of statements related to expectations and perceptions (Diana Zuhro et al. 2024 : 98)

## 5. Comparison

Comparison with existing state-of-the-art studies highlights the distinctive contributions of this research. Prior studies on Gen Z consumer behavior in digital environments, such as those by Ferdous et al. and Sokolova, predominantly focus on measurable interaction metrics like likes, shares, and purchasing intentions. Similarly, research by Suryaningrum et al. and Koenkytö explored how social media engagement influences consumer purchasing decisions, but primarily through quantitative approaches that analyze behavior patterns in isolation from subjective and emotional dimensions.

In contrast, the present study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to uncover the deeper, subjective meanings behind Gen Z's interactions with culinary brands on TikTok. By focusing on emotional engagement, identity construction, and expectations of authenticity and interactivity, this study expands upon the frameworks introduced by Brodie et al. and Farhat et al., offering empirical insights into how social identities and emotional needs shape digital brand engagement.

Furthermore, previous research largely treats TikTok as a transactional marketing platform. This study, however, positions TikTok as a *cultural ecosystem* where consumer-brand relationships are co-created through algorithm-driven content personalization, participatory culture, and interactive communication. Unlike prior studies that view user engagement as passive or linear, this research demonstrates that Gen Z consumers act as active agents, using culinary brand content to express social identity, participate in cultural narratives, and build emotional connections.

This nuanced understanding contributes to the theoretical enrichment of digital consumer engagement models, particularly within visual and algorithmic media contexts, offering a significant departure from traditional clickstream-based analysis.

In summary, compared to state-of-the-art studies, this research provides:

- A qualitative, emotion-centered perspective rather than interaction frequency analysis;
- Insights into identity performance and social co-creation in digital culinary branding;
- Recognition of TikTok as a dynamic, socio-cultural platform rather than a static marketing tool.

These contributions position the study as an important addition to the expanding discourse on Gen Z digital engagement in the culinary industry.

## Conclusions

This research provides an in-depth understanding of Gen Z's behavior in responding to digital culinary brands on the TikTok platform. The findings suggest that Gen Z engagement is not solely consumptive in nature, but rather a complex social process—involving emotions, digital identities, and expectations for brand authenticity and interactivity. Through thematic analysis of participant narratives and digital observations, the study confirms that TikTok is not just a promotional channel, but a cultural ecosystem that shapes the way Gen Z interprets, chooses, and recommends culinary brands.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the enrichment of the literature on *consumer engagement* and *social identity* in the context of social media based on visual algorithms. This research expands the understanding of how digital practices mediate the relationship between young consumers and brands in an increasingly competitive culinary industry. In practical terms, these results suggest that brands need to develop a more authentic, participatory, and culturally aligned approach to the platform, in order to build an ongoing emotional connection with the Gen Z segment.

Policy implications are also relevant, especially for regulators and digital creative industry players, to consider how the dynamics of viral content affect consumption preferences and

the formation of public opinion, especially in the culinary MSME sector. For further research, it is recommended to explore more broadly with a cross-cultural approach or comparative studies between social platforms, in order to explore the differences in contexts and dynamics of digital engagement that are more diverse.

Thus, this study not only enriches the academic discourse on digital consumer behavior, but also makes an applicative contribution in designing more relevant brand communication strategies in the visual digital era such as TikTok.

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