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Social media marketing over traditional media marketing for Sri Lankan emerging apparel brands: An exploration on generation Z

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Abstract

Digitalisation has transformed the business market, especially the apparel industry. In the Sri Lankan context, apparel brands have engaged with Generation Z consumers through social media to build their online presence. Although brands have adopted social media marketing strategies, there is limited research exploring how Generation Z consumers interact with and respond to these marketing approaches within the local retail apparel market in Sri Lanka. In this context, the present study aimed to examine how social media marketing strategies outperform traditional media marketing in attracting and engaging Generation Z consumers of emerging apparel brands in Sri Lanka, focusing on interactive engagement, youth-centric targeting, and strategic content optimisation. A qualitative approach was employed, incorporating face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 12 participants who had purchased from emerging apparel brands at least three times during 2024. The data collected were analysed, and emerging themes and data patterns were identified through thematic analysis. The findings revealed that social media marketing strategies foster interactive engagement among consumers through two-way communication and personalised targeting. Furthermore, Generation Z interviewees expressed a preference for active, relatable, engaging, and readily accessible content over passive forms of content generated via traditional media marketing. Social media marketing strategies used to engage Generation Z consumers are more effective and relevant compared to traditional media marketing strategies. In the Sri Lankan setting, emerging apparel brands can align and optimise their strategies to further benefit from engaging Generation Z consumers.

Keywords: Apparel, Generation Z, Social media marketing, Traditional media marketing.

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1. Introduction

Digitalisation and technological transformation were evident after the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, as most industries moved to hybrid environment while adapting to the advancement of innovations. Furthermore, globalization has reduced barriers between countries, enabling apparel firms to freely exchange goods and services [1]. As a result, social media marketing underwent an immense leap by connecting the consumer and brands that promoted their products through social platforms. A study by Fang, et al. [2] shows that advertising spending of a brand leading to positive purchase decisions. Thus, social media platforms acts as a vital role in influencing the consumer purchase decision by uplifting the consumer belief as well as the data security of such platforms [3].

Specially in the apparel sector, product marketing is frequent and ongoing, as new products are launched from time to time as seasons demand [4]. Along with the industrial revolution that influenced the apparel sector, using social media over traditional marketing has gained huge potential with its brands to gather the tech savvy generation Z consumers. These apparel players have to utilise the digital landscape properly, albeit the conventional media like television, newspapers, and magazines do their part in advertising and marketing.

The generation Z consumers and social media marketing are under researched and underrepresented in existing literature receiving limited attention. Prior studies have addressed and the importance of these modern social media marketing strategies on a global scale but lacks studies on the Sri Lankan scope. Authors of this study identified the gap to explore the effectiveness of social media marketing over traditional media marketing for generation Z consumers of the emerging apparel brands in Sri Lanka. A study by Vogels, et al. [5] shows that 95% of generation Z owns or has access to a mobile phone and 97% use the internet daily. According to Wibowo, et al. [6] television viewing of generation Z is less as the latter are more into streaming services online. Extending research along these lines, Prasanna and Lakshmi Priyanka [7] state that, this generation's unique relationship with technology influences their preferences for short-form, visually appealing content and their engagement with platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat. It means that social media marketing content much aligns with this younger generations' preferences than advertisement on traditional marketing channels. Smart insight data reveal that, by February 2025, on average a single user spend 34 hours and 56 minutes on TikTok, 27 hours and 10 minutes on YouTube, 17 hours and 17 minutes on Facebook, 16 hours and 13 minutes on Instagram per month [8]. This shows that there is a higher chance for apparel brands in terms of attracting the younger generation, if the brand uses social media marketing instead of traditional marketing methods.

The objective of the study is to explore how social media strategies can engage with/connect with generation Z consumers with the attractiveness of social media over traditional marketing for the emerging apparel brands in the Sri Lankan context.

2. Literature Review

Social media marketing has seen a fundamental shift in retail industries after the Covid-19 outbreak. Thus, researchers have conducted empirical studies to highlight the importance of digitalisation and social media for brands in the market.

A relevant study was done by van der Bend, et al. [9] where the impact of social media marketing on adolescents and their cognition was researched upon. Their study depicts the behaviour of adolescents and how it links to social media usage and engagement. These scholars carried out a qualitative study obtaining data via semi-structured interviews. However, their study was carried out by interviewing experts and may not have captured the adolescent perspective in full, as generalisation is not possible. Thus, the results obtained may be biased.

In relation to the above [10] further built on the role of social media and how it shapes perceptions of consumers. In doing so, it was identified that opinion mining and sentiment analysis provides accurate information for a brand regarding its positioning in the minds of the consumers in comparison to traditional surveys. Furthermore, consumer reviews provide another platform for consumers to voice out their opinions regarding the brands. The above-mentioned study was done using a text mining approach using opinion mining and sentiment analysis but lacked depth since their analysis was restricted to Turkish-language reviews. This limited the brands identified and studied upon which limits generalisation.

Further emphasis on social media marketing strategies was presented through findings of Shutze [11] This study provided insights which support the linkage of attracting and retaining consumers through social media marketing strategies whilst maintaining a successful branding. Moreover, customer-centric marketing involving personalised communication-built trust and engagement amongst the consumers. The same study performed a narrative review to accumulate data in addition to referring and accessing past literature thus limited discussions and lacked empirical data.

Similarly, Conti, et al. [12] insisted on customer value created and the effectiveness of social media marketing as a result of a strong digital adoption by some brands. For their study, survey-based research took place on 205 Italian manufacturing firms and a hierarchical cluster analysis to categorise the companies based on their level of digitalisation and regression analysis to examine the relationship between customer value raised due to digital adoption. Nevertheless, the study's findings were limited to Italian manufacturing firms only and only considered 205 companies.

In addition to the above, Splendiani, et al. [13] determined the strategic role played by social media in terms of maintaining a brand's image, allowing customer engagement and personalised marketing to take place. Their study extracted data from a survey of 282 agencies to understand the effect of social media adoption and effectiveness. However, it was also limited to Italy whilst failing to capture customer perspectives, thus limiting findings on the actual influence of social media.

A technology-driven approach and finding was obtained by Malekpour, et al. [14] which focused on integrating AI driven personalisation onto social media marketing in order to better engage consumers whilst building a personal relationship. The data were obtained via 200 consumer surveys. Moreover, the industry perspective was also analysed by

carrying out qualitative interviews with retail managers of brands. Nonetheless, limitations were present as the study only focused on Iran and the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) model used to analyse results simplifies complex behaviour of consumers.

Further addition of knowledge to the concept of personalised marketing was acquired by Jain and Sundström [15] as their study highlighted personalised services to consumers of online apparel brands in order to enhance their satisfaction and perceived value. Their research was carried out on three Swedish apparel retailing brands interviewing respondents via a semi-structured approach and then performing a theory-driven analysis which combined both past literature and empirical insights. However, the study had a small sample size and lacked quantitative data and analysis to strengthen the framework proposed.

Elaborating the importance of digitalisation, the study by Gazzola, et al. [16] uncovered digitalisation as a fundamental shift in today's market rather than just a trend, and draws attention to artificial intelligence driven or AI-driven shopping experiences for consumers. Their study conducted a bibliometric analysis of 277 peer-reviewed articles on a time span of 25 years during 1998 – 2023 critically reviewing a further 10 papers. Nevertheless, bibliometric methods have failed to evaluate practical industry implementations, as a result, the study's focus is theoretical, lacking empirical data which validates brands in the real world.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research employs a qualitative and exploratory approach to analyse how social media marketing strategies are leveraged by generation Z consumers interacting with emerging Sri Lankan apparel brands, in comparison to traditional media strategies. Rooted in the experiences and viewpoints of generation Z consumers, an inductive approach was used with the aim of developing a theory from their stories. Accordingly, the study also attempted to collect responses and suggestions to improve the marketing efforts of emerging apparel brands.

3.2. Target Population and Sampling

The target population of this study consisted of generation Z consumers, who engaged online with emerging Sri Lankan apparel brands and each made three online purchases in the year 2024. Emerging apparel brands were identified using 'The Digital Outlook Sri Lanka 2024: The Annual Market Insight Report.'

The study employed a purposive sampling approach which allowed the researchers to select relevant and experienced participants who fit the research requirements. Regarding the research objectives, this non-probability sampling method collected data from participants who had a broad range of insights pertinent to the discourse surrounding brand interaction and marketing in the digital sphere.

3.3. Sample Size

The research was conducted with a sample of 12 participants. This number or sample size is acceptable for qualitative research since the focus is on gaining comprehensive understanding and not generalising from statistical perspectives. The sample included participants from generation Z of different ages, genders, and employment statuses as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Respondent Profile.

Respondent	Age	Gender	Employment Status	Civil Status
Respondent 01	20-23	Male	Employed	Unmarried
Respondent 02	20-23	Female	Employed	Unmarried
Respondent 03	24-27	Male	Employed	Unmarried
Respondent 04	16-19	Male	Employed	Unmarried
Respondent 05	20-23	Male	Unemployed	Unmarried
Respondent 06	24-27	Female	Employed	Married
Respondent 07	24-27	Male	Employed	Unmarried
Respondent 08	20-23	Female	Unemployed	Unmarried
Respondent 09	20-23	Male	Employed	Unmarried
Respondent 10	16-19	Female	Unemployed	Unmarried
Respondent 11	20-23	Female	Employed	Married
Respondent 12	20-23	Male	Employed	Unmarried

3.4. Data Collection Method and Instrument

The data collection instrument was face-to-face semi-structured interviews. This approach facilitated highly appreciative description of participants' experiences and provided opportunities for deeper probing, specially in a qualitative approach. The interview guide was created from the answerable research questions and relevant literature, based on tested questionnaires. Each interview lasted for about 40-50 minutes.

The interviews were conducted by researchers. One of them focused on interviewing while the others noted down the details of the conversation. With prior permission from the participants, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy of data collection and transcription processes. As such, the study conforms with the ethical research procedures.

3.5. Reliability and Validity

To improve reliability, the researchers maintained an interview protocol for all participants. Each interview was transcribed verbatim, and coding was done independently by several researchers before agreeing on a final version following the discussion. For validity, the study ensured triangulation validity by comparing codes across the participants and checking for consistency in themes across participants. Participants were assured confidentiality and trust, which assisted in reducing social desirability bias by ensuring participants answered openly and honestly. Participants were informed that their honest opinion, with no right nor wrong answers, is vital for the research purpose [17].

3.6. Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis based on the framework provided by Clarke and Braun [18]. It involved six iterative phases: familiarisation, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, defining and naming, and report production. The authors moved back and forth between processes to improve the findings, which made the analysis non-linear and recursive. The themes and codes created were based on the participants' perspectives to ensure that these accurately represented the participants' views.

4. Results

This study's findings fortify the importance of social media marketing as a tool with growing influence in the retail market especially beneficial to emerging apparel brands based in Sri Lanka. Three central themes were identified through thematic analysis based on the semi-structured interviews.

Table 2.
Main Themes Identified Through Thematic Analysis.

Themes	Codes
Interactive Consumer Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal and engaging • Connect and interact • Two-way communication
Youth Centric Targeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Younger audiences • Interests and past interactions • Highly targeted ads
Social Media Strategy Optimisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging • Relatable and interactive • Focus level

4.1. Interactive Consumer Engagement

This theme explores the engagement of consumers with social media marketing strategies highlighting the advantage of maintaining a two-way communication channel which allows interaction between the apparel brand and its consumers to remain intimate and engaging. This is in contrast to traditional advertisements which are viewed as passive rather than active. This theme does not cover all the different levels of engagement present with each social media marketing strategy but focuses on underlining the positives associated with social media as a form of better engagement.

Respondent 04: *"Social media allows for two-way communication"*

Respondent 07: *"Makes interactions more personal and responsive"*

Respondents stressed upon the dynamic nature of social media, as brands initiated conversations and formed relationships with their consumers rather than simply marketing their market offerings. This creates an intimate relationship between the brand and its consumers which is perceived to be personalised and engaging.

Youth Centric Targeting

This theme explores the audience that is strongly associated with social media marketing strategies. These strategies highly target potential customers and existing consumers belonging to a younger audience as identified through the results obtained. This theme does not cater to exploring the effects social media marketing has on other age groups but rather specifies the scope to young consumers since they significantly spend more time on social media as opposed to interacting with traditional forms of advertisements.

Respondent 01: *"Social media ads can be highly targeted, reaching specific audiences"*

Respondent 05: *"Most of us spend way more time on social media than watching TV or reading magazines"*

Respondents interviewed explained how social media platform algorithms ensured brands were effective in delivering their content to their target audience. This is because the campaigns are aligned to the respective and specific tastes, preferences and behaviours of the consumers. These targeted ads allow consumers to be part of personalised marketing.

4.2. Social Media Strategy Optimisation

This theme explores the strategy incorporated by apparel brands utilising social media marketing. Brands optimising their social media marketing strategies have increased their visibility, spread trends and have created engagement amongst the community of consumers through campaigns integrating user-generated content and hashtags. This theme does not include all the strategies linked to social media marketing and the various benefits it brings to brands but addresses the

relatability and accessibility factor of social media marketing and its effect on building brand awareness and a loyal consumer base.

Respondent 07: "They're so accessible, you're just a click away from exploring or even making a purchase"

Respondent 12: "Social media strategies are more engaging than traditional ads as they allow people to connect and interact"

Respondents highlighted several modern social media strategies which focus on generating content by consumers themselves in addition to generating content via ripple effects made by hashtag campaigns. The findings emphasised that brands are far more effective in their marketing approaches by utilising strategies that promote them as accessible and authentic in the eyes of the consumers, rather than relying on campaigns that reach mass audience and are expensive in terms of budget.

5. Discussion

The findings reinforce existing literature while contributing novel insights that extend current knowledge on social media-driven consumer engagement within the apparel industry. The development of themes shown in Table 2.

5.1. Interactive Consumer Engagement

Studies done in the past highlight the dynamic participatory nature of social media marketing [9] and Shutze [11]. However, this study has analysed ground level data providing qualitative evidence that generation Z consumers of Sri Lanka actively seek social media engagement instead of traditional media engagement. The respondents expressed that social media marketing fosters real-time communication, which takes place on a bi-directional channel as interactions with a brand are personalised, strengthening consumer relationships with the brand. In contrast to traditional media which is generally viewed as passive by the respondents, social media builds active engagement and participation which is fortified by the findings obtained by Shutze [11]. The above-mentioned study depicts the importance of personalised communication and the present study expands this aspect to present how interactivity signifies higher engagement amongst consumers of Sri Lankan emerging apparel brands.

5.2. Youth Centric Targeting

Literature accumulated proves social media marketing campaigns can be run on highly targeted advertisements as evident in the findings by Yilmaz and Altunay [10] and Conti, et al. [12]. This study extends this concept into practice as generation Z consumers demonstrated being conscious and receptive to brands' targeted advertisement campaigns. The respondents provided validation that social media target advertisements market content relevant to their attitude, styles and past interactions, with brands offering personalisation as opposed to being marketed to generalised content. The above statement is in line with the study done by Yilmaz and Altunay [10] as the consumer sentiment analysis carried out reveals critical perspectives of the consumers. The study has furnished these data-driven findings provided qualitative discussions and insights obtained from consumers as the respondents expressed their preference for personalised algorithm-driven content over generic content.

5.3. Social Media Optimisation

Research done previously have focused on global scales reflected in the studies by Jain and Sundström [15] and Gazzola, et al. [16]. This study has provided meaningful observations on the consumer interest and engagement derived from Sri Lankan emerging apparel brands using social media marketing strategies, as past studies have lacked the Sri Lankan market insights. This study has strengthened comprehension by substantiating that social media marketing strategies are not just preferred alternative to traditional media but have been the primary strategy of marketing for emerging apparel brands in Sri Lanka targeting the generation Z market. Even though Malekpour, et al. [14] provide perspective on the benefits of AI-driven personalisation, this study indicates social media marketing strategies such as user-generated content and hashtag campaigns are still productive and effective for emerging apparel brands in Sri Lanka.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to past and current literature by providing qualitative, consumer evidence from a Sri Lankan scope proving that generation Z consumers favour social media marketing over traditional media marketing. Future research could cover how different social media marketing strategies present affect each age group in the consumer market exploring any new additional social media marketing strategy which may have evolved with time in a quantitative approach. This study aim was to gather in-depth insights into the lived experiences of a selected group of respondents. Therefore, the results of this study are unable to be generalized to all over Sri Lanka to different age groups. Moreover, studies may be carried out to determine the effects of AI-driven personalisation as a form of social media marketing done by brands in emerging apparel markets.

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