Challenges for Establishing Brand Equity in the Digital Era with Special Reference to Generation Z: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract
The digital age has affected how brand equity is established, communicated, and maintained — especially for Gen Z, who spend much time on digital platforms and use interactive media. Older ways of creating brand equity (awareness, loyalty, perceived quality, and associations) will be less effective due to the increased use of social media, influencer marketing, e-WOM, AI-driven personalised advertising, m-commerce, and digital storytelling. Using a systematic literature review approach, this paper identifies key issues for firms attempting to establish brand equity digitally, with a focus on Gen Z. Studies relevant to the paper's objectives were located via searches of top-tier academic databases using predetermined search terms, then reviewed systematically. The findings from the review synthesise the available research to identify the most prominent themes and concerns about how to build brand equity for younger generations digitally. Findings indicate that Gen Z's formation of brand equity is significantly influenced by authenticity, trustworthiness, the degree of personalisation, social proof, influencer credibility, and the overall experience within an interactive digital platform. At the same time, there are many barriers that firms encounter in developing a sustainable brand equity relationship with Gen Z. These include digital clutter, distractions stemming from fractured attention patterns, consumer concerns about privacy, the volatile nature of loyalty, a vulnerable reputation, and rapidly changing preferences for the digital platforms used. This review concludes that developing brand equity in today's digital environment is no longer a one-way (linear), firm-controlled process, but rather a dynamic co-creative process driven by consumers/influencers/algorithms/online communities. Additionally, this study contributes by integrating disparate research into a coherent framework of current challenges in digital brand equity, providing a basis for future empirical research and strategic guidance for branding efforts.

Keywords: Brand equity, Generation Z, Digital era, social media, Influencer marketing, Systematic literature review.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Social Sustainability in MSMEs

The last decade has seen massive technological advancements transform virtually all aspects of doing business — including how businesses develop, convey, and maintain their brands. Businesses now use digital platforms, mobile applications, social networks, artificial intelligence, influencer marketing, social commerce and other new ways to reach consumers. While previously branding was a one-way communication process initiated by businesses, today's digital environment allows consumers, communities, algorithms and creators to equally help define what a brand represents. As such, developing brand equity is a much more complex and dynamic task today compared to previous times in marketing history (Verhoef et al., 2021; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Kannan & Li, 2017).

Brand equity remains one of the most valuable types of intangible organizational assets. It adds value to customers' perceptions, increases consumers' willingness to pay premium prices, expands the market share of the organization, assists with building relationships with various distribution channels and ultimately provides organizations with improved long-term financial results. Early foundational work on brand equity defined customer-based brand equity as the difference made in consumer reaction to marketing actions due to the knowledge of a brand (Keller, 1993). Likewise, subsequent studies (Yoo & Donthu, 2001; Pappu et al., 2005) indicated that four primary dimensions of brand knowledge drive customer-based brand equity: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and brand loyalty. These studies have supported prior findings demonstrating that greater brand equity improves the likelihood of purchases, customer retention, resilience in turbulent markets and ultimately improves the overall valuation of an organization (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010; Datta et al., 2017; Foroudi, 2019).

As digitally connected markets evolve, so too do assumptions regarding traditional models of brand equity. Traditionally, companies had relative control over communication via television/radio advertising, print advertising, packaging, and physical retail space. Today however, digitally connected markets are characterized by fragmented attention spans, instant feedback, real time comparisons of competing products, user generated content and high transparency of brand reputation. As a result, consumers can rapidly review, recommend, criticize, parody or abandon brands in public viewable online spaces. Hence brand equity is increasingly being shaped by engagement quality, trust in online communications, consistent experience quality, evidence of social validation and online reputation as opposed to advertising exposure (Keller, 2016; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Kannan & Li, 2017).

Research in recent years supports this transition. Rojas-Lamorena et al. (2022) conducted a bibliometric analysis of brand equity research that identified a definitive move toward digital context-based research. Specifically, researchers are focusing more heavily on social media interactions and experiential brand equity. Gody et al. (2016) found that social media marketing efforts had a positive impact on purchase intent and dimensions of brand equity. Ismail (2017) found that social media-based brand activities positively impacted brand loyalty and brand consciousness. Overall, the above findings support the conclusion that digital communication mediums are no longer supplemental branding tools; instead, they serve as primary mechanisms for creating brand equity.

This transition to digitally mediated marketing environments is particularly significant when analysing Generation Z. Generation Z refers to individuals born between approximately the mid-1990s and early 2010s. Generation Z is typically referred to as the "digital native" generation as they were raised using smart phones and social media as a part of everyday life. According to Djafarova and Bowes (2021); Fromm and Read (2018), compared to preceding generations Gen Z consumers prefer immediate gratification from brands as well as increased convenience, customization options and authentic/transparent communications.

Studies have suggested that Generation Z is assessing brands using a wider array of factors then preceding generations. Notably, beyond assessing the product quality and pricing of brands Gen Z consumers increasingly evaluate brands based on their authenticity, commitment to sustainability, diversity/inclusion policies and ethical behaviour as well as their ability to provide high-quality digital experiences. As Vredenburg et al. (2020); Kim and Sullivan (2019) have noted in several markets Gen Z consumers will reward brands that support their identity/values while penalizing those that are perceived as disingenuous or opportunistic.

Therefore digital-era brand equity for Gen Z is not simply a cognitive construct; it is also a social/symbolic construct.

Social media engagement presents perhaps the greatest force influencing brand equity in digitally mediated marketing environments. Social media enables consumers to interact directly with brands through messaging, commenting on posts and participating in branded initiatives. Studies have shown that social media engagement has a positive relationship with consumers' levels of trust in a brand (Harrigan et al., 2018; Dessart et al., 2015). Additionally, Schivinski and Dabrowski (2016) found that user-generated content (UGC) can significantly influence consumers' attitudes toward a brand as well as their resulting behaviours.

For Gen Z — whose day-to-day lives are increasingly intertwined with social media — the engagement opportunities presented through social media are particularly salient.

Additionally, the proliferation of influencer marketing has created a new method for brands to generate interest in their offerings through social media. Influencers — who are often thought of as opinion leaders — can promote brands and products and assist in generating awareness about them. Lou and Yuan (2019) found that influencers' credibility, informativeness and entertainment value are positively associated with consumers' trust and attitudes toward sponsored content. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) also found that parasocial interaction and trust in an influencer significantly increased consumers' purchase intention. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found that young women tend to consider Instagram influencers more relatable/trustworthy than traditional celebrity endorsers. These findings have particular implications for Gen Z — who are known to be influenced by influencers and their endorsements.

However, relying on influencers does present its own challenges for developing and maintaining stable brand equity. Relying on influencers can potentially dilute the core identity of a brand — or create vulnerabilities for the organization should the influencers themselves become problematic. Moreover — as has been noted by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) — Gen Z consumers are very attuned to authenticity and may reject overtly commercial or scripted influencer endorsements. Hence — while influencers can certainly enhance awareness and relevance for a brand — they can also increase the risk of instability.

Another challenge faced by marketers today is the growing reliance on electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) and online reviews. With more consumers engaging in e-commerce — there is greater reliance on peer opinions when evaluating unknown brands. The literature has established that online reviews significantly influence consumers' levels of trust in a brand (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Given that Gen Z consumers are familiar with rating/review systems — e-WOM often serves as a key indicator of brand legitimacy. This implies that digital-era brand equity is dependent upon not only what companies communicate but also what communities collectively state about a company.

Lastly digital personalization technologies have created yet another paradox for marketers today. Through artificial intelligence (AI), predictive analytics and recommendation engines — companies can personalize messages — offers — experiences to individual consumers. Personalization can lead to increased relevance — satisfaction — and conversion rates for companies (Bleier & Eisenbeiss, 2015). However, at the same time — some consumers may see excessive personalization as overly intrusive or manipulative. Aguirre et al. (2016) refer to this tension as the personalization paradox — where strategies designed to collect information may harm trust if they appear invasive. The concern over invasiveness is particularly significant for Gen Z — who desire convenient services but are increasingly concerned with issues related to privacy — and surveillance via algorithms.

Moreover, digital markets are characterized by content saturation — attention fragmentation — and competition for consumer attention. Consumers are constantly bombarded with thousands of commercial messages each day across multiple channels (social media feeds — email — video — livestreams etc.). Due to this level of saturation — attention itself has become one of the rarest commodities available to marketers today. Additionally short-form content formats (stories — reels — live streams etc.) encourage rapid creation — novelty — emotion — speed — and visual stimulation — making it difficult for brands to sustain meaningful engagement — let alone recall — in these environments. Younger consumers tend to ignore repetitive or generic messages — favouring instead interactive — entertaining — socially-relevant messages that resonate with them (Tafesse, 2016; Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

Authenticity has thus become an essential strategic imperative for companies seeking to establish enduring relationships with Gen Z. Authenticity is a concept that has been studied extensively in relation to branding (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). The authors demonstrated that perceived authenticity positively relates to trust — attachment — and loyalty. Napoli et al. additionally found that perceived authenticity positively relates to perceived quality and credibility. In today's digital environment — where consumers can easily verify claims and compare values — authenticity is required for creating enduring relationships with sceptical and informed audiences like Gen Z.

Finally digital-era brand loyalty continues to be fragile. Traditionally loyalty was fostered through habit — barriers to switching — lack of information. In contrast today's digital environment allows for instant comparison shopping — easy access to niche competitors — rapid changes in preference. Research has shown that Gen Z consumers are more experimental than preceding generations (Priporas et al., 2017) and are more likely to adopt emerging competitive brands that offer superior identity/convenience/value propositions. As such marketers can no longer assume that past reputation will guarantee loyalty.

Most recent research from 2022-2026 clearly establishes that Gen Z's assessments of brands in terms of brand equity continue to be influenced by digital identity mechanisms — digital platform experiences — and engagement centred on authenticity. Srivastava (2025), in a study examining inheritance of brands demonstrated that legacy brands continue to be relevant to Gen Z as long as heritage is communicated through familiarity with digital technology — authenticity — innovation as opposed to nostalgia alone. Theocharis and Tsekouropoulos (2025) examined online experiences with new technologically-enabled products emphasizing sustainable linked consumption patterns among Gen Z consumers found similar results that Gen Z's assessment of brands in terms of adoption include online experience with the brand — engagement with the brand — image of the brand — trust in the brand — loyalty to the brand — awareness of the brand — behavioural intention to consume the brand — knowledge of the brand.

Similar results were obtained by Hasim and Nazri (2025) who demonstrated through empirical studies examining mobile applications designed for Gen Z that mobile application design — branding — personalized marketing via AI-driven prediction/analytics/recommendation engines — integration of social commerce all positively affected Gen Z's willingness to make purchases through mobile applications. Most importantly AI driven personalization significantly enhanced Gen Z's willingness to purchase through mobile applications while integration of social commerce served as an important mediation mechanism for this relationship. Importantly Hasim and Nazri (2025) also note that despite enhanced convenience/relevance provided through AI-driven personalization Gen Z remains wary of providing personally identifiable information/data for fear of violating their data privacy/trust concerns.

Huynh et al. (2025) examined Gen Z's purchase decision-making processes within Vietnam's beauty industry. Results demonstrated that trustworthiness of influencers represented the single most critical factor driving Vietnamese Gen Z's purchase decisions for beauty products. Results also demonstrated that attractiveness of influencer sponsored content was also an indirect driver of purchase decision-making processes through influencing Gen Z's perceptions of the brand image/follower relationships with influencers. Overall, these studies demonstrate that digital-era brand equity is primarily shaped by combinations of interface quality/personalization/social proof/mediated communication-based trust in Gen Z.

More recent studies also indicate that branding practices are evolving toward immersive/experiential/influencer led/hybrid forms of influence. A bibliometric review of research on virtual influencers in marketing by Pushparaj et al. (2025) demonstrates the growth in this area of study surrounding topics such as trust/source credibility/parasocial relationships/anthropomorphism/authenticity. As noted by Wang et al. (2025) in China's Gen Z market controlling behaviours/interactivity/parasocial relationship/influence-product-congruence/source credibility all positively affect Chinese Gen Z's purchase intentions with emotional attachments/moderating effects attributed to brand equity/loyalty/attachment respectively.

Janssen & Rudeloff (2025) extended influencer logic into employer branding finding that Chinese Gen Z employees assessed employers more favourably when employees believed there existed congruences between employer-brand fit/parasocial interactions employed by corporate influencers versus third party influencers. These studies demonstrate that contemporary brand equity continues to depend on symbolic-relational mechanisms that are partially sourced outside the firm to digital personas/influencers/creator ecologies.

Additional recent trends indicate a renewed emphasis on authenticity rich storytelling/psycho-social determinants of value perception among contemporary marketers. Leandro et al. (2025) investigated whether podcasts could create deeper connections between institutional identities/belonging/brand advocacy among stakeholders. Findings demonstrated that podcast based digital storytelling created stronger institutional identities/belonging among stakeholders who became converted into advocates for the institutions depicted in the podcasts; further illustrating the potential for intimate/narrative meaning-making within equitable contexts.

Similarly, Rajput & Gandhi (2025) demonstrated that authentic UGC has a stronger effect than superficial UGC in shaping Gen Z sustainable travel intentions; supporting findings previously mentioned about authentic content enhancing persuasive power within digitally mediated contexts.

Abdrabbo et al. (2025) demonstrated that in digitally mediated luxury consumption needs for uniqueness significantly predicted purchase intentions among Gen Z while fears of missing out (FoMO) strengthened those predictions; providing additional insight into factors that influence digital-era brand equity among younger consumers as being shaped by pressures relating to identity signalling/emotionally charged online environments/social comparison processes.

More recently Costa-Feito et al. (2025) demonstrated through empirical research studies focused on fashion apparel consumption among Gen Z fashion consumers that firm-created UGC/user-generated UGC both positively influenced awareness of Gen Z fashion apparel brands while hedonic expectations were significantly important in predicting quality perceptions/response toward online fashion apparel brands.

Tang et al. (2025) demonstrated empirically that social media marketing communication directly contributed to customer-based brand equity within higher education contexts; supporting previous findings regarding the role of digital content ecosystems within modern branding practices.

Collectively these studies support the assertion that creating digital-era brand equity requires firms to engage not only

Sustainability and corporate social responsibility are now increasingly linked with results from brand equity in the literature. Younger generations have shown they are willing to financially support brands that consumers perceive to be socially responsible, ethical, and environmentally conscious (Hur et al. 2014; Bhattacharya and Sen 2004), whereas "green washing" and/or "performative activism" can quickly undermine the credibility of a brand's digital reputation in a world where everything is being watched by everyone (and their relatives) via digitally connected mediums.

Digital marketing, social media branding, influencer communications, online trust and Gen Z consumer behaviour research has exploded but despite this growth there still exists an abundance of literature focused on discrete aspects of online behaviours such as; purchase intentions, engagement levels, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), influencer based trust models, and user experience/ability of platforms. Very few studies exist which aggregate the findings above using the lens of digital brand equity development challenges faced by organizations with special consideration given to Gen Z. Therefore, this literature gap provides substantial reasoning for a systematic literature review.

Therefore, the current study will utilize a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to investigate the topic Challenges for Establishing Brand Equity in the Digital Era with Special Reference to Generation Z. The study aims to integrate relevant existing research, to develop a comprehensive understanding of the major barriers/driver for developing digital brand equity, and to create a structured framework for future scholarly work and practical applications.

The following research questions guide the review:

Q1. What are the key challenges faced by firms in establishing brand equity in the digital era?

Q2. How does Generation Z reshape the drivers and expectations associated with brand equity?

Q3. What strategic implications emerge for firms seeking to build sustainable digital brand equity among younger consumers?

2 Methodology

In order to identify the challenges that arise when attempting to develop brand equity in the Digital Age with regard to Generation Z consumers, a detailed literature review was conducted. As an initial stage within this literature review a systematic literature review methodology was employed. There were several stages to the systematic literature review methodology that include developing a comprehensive search strategy, identifying relevant studies, determining the quality of each study by utilizing predetermined criteria, narrowing down the identified studies based upon whether or not they met certain criteria and finally synthesizing the results from all of the selected studies. It was felt that a systematic review would be necessary due to prior studies on digital marketing, social media branding, brand equity, and Generation Z behavior being dispersed among many different journals, industries and methodologies. Therefore, it is through a systematic review that disparate pieces of evidence can be effectively integrated into an identifiable pattern. This study will follow the general principles established by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. Many review studies have utilized PRISMA guidelines in various disciplines such as education, health care, technology and management. Through application of PRISMA, transparency and replicability in reviews become enhanced and the potential for reviewer subjectivity diminishes. The PRISMA guidelines directed four specific stages for this study; namely, identification, screening, evaluation of eligibility and ultimately, the inclusion of qualified studies. In addition to a focus on the above-mentioned areas of branding, consumer behaviour, digital marketing, social media systems and Gen-Z consumer behaviours, a comprehensive literature search was also performed to establish broad and qualitative representation. Literature searches were performed using major international databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Emerald Insight, Taylor & Francis Online and Wiley Online Library. Open access sources were searched via Google Scholar. Due to its extensive indexing of peer-reviewed journals related to business, management, marketing, psychology and digital commerce, Scopus was designated as the primary database during the identification phase. Search strings were developed during the identification phase using terms representing the four main concepts of interest; brand equity, digital environment, Generation Z and branding challenges. Examples of representative terms include "brand equity," "customer-based brand equity," "branding," "digital marketing," "social media," "influencer marketing," "eWOM," "AI personalization," "Generation Z," "Gen Z," "digital natives," "trust," "authenticity," "loyalty" and "privacy." Boolean combinations of these terms were applied to increase search relevance. The principal Scopus search string was:

TITLE-ABS-KEY(

("brand equity" OR branding OR "customer-based brand equity")

AND

("Generation Z" OR "Gen Z")

AND

(digital OR "social media" OR influencer OR eWOM OR personalization)

)

Beginning at the beginning, the study's search process was based upon articles that have been published through June 2026. The primary timeline for this search encompassed the years 2010 to 2026, as these are the most recent years during which there has been significant growth in mobile-first consumption, social commerce, branded platforms, and research related to digital marketing among Gen-Z. For this reason, seminal pre-2010 theoretical works were included as needed to provide a consistent framework. In total, 286 records were initially retrieved across all databases. Following the exclusion of duplicate records, editorials, book reviews, and records that could not be accessed, 249 records remained eligible for title/abstract screening. As part of title/abstract screening, records that were deemed irrelevant to branding or were solely concerned with other technical advertising issues; or lacked relevancy to consumer markets were removed. Due to this screening criteria, 97 records were removed resulting in 152 records being available for full-text eligibility assessments. Full-text assessments required an in-depth examination of each of the remaining records (i.e., the full-text) in order to assess the conceptual relevance of the record, the methodology used within the record, the quality of the journal that published the record, and whether it directly contributed to our understanding of digital brand equity or Gen-Z consumer behaviour. Records were selected for inclusion if they specifically addressed one or more of the following areas: social media branding, influence by influencers, online trustworthiness, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), personalized experiences for customers, digital customer experience, brand loyalty, authenticity, sustainable branding practices, or how Gen-Z consumers respond to brands. Ultimately, after conducting full-text assessments, 74 records were excluded from further consideration because of their low alignment with the objectives of this review. Therefore, a total of 78 studies remain to be synthesized into findings.

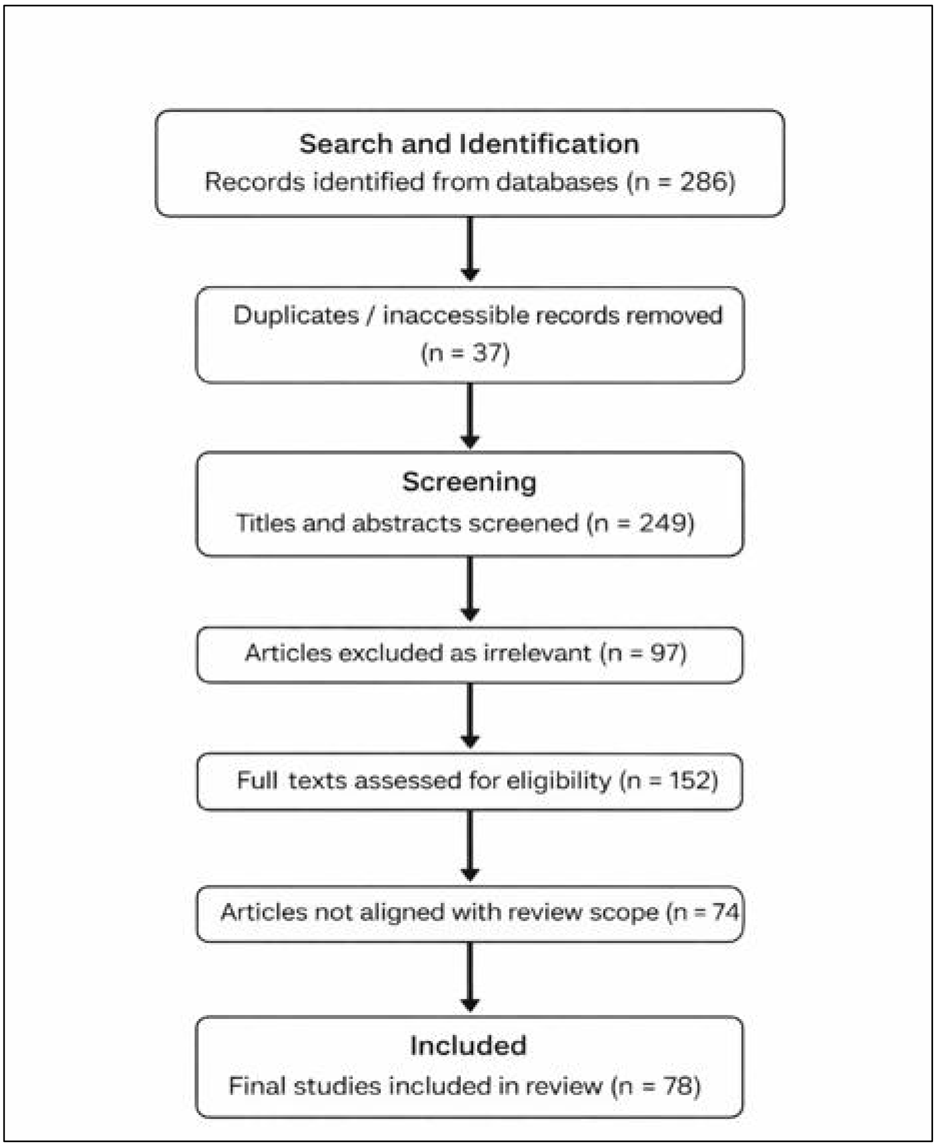

Figure 1 Flow Chart of Systematic Review Process

2.1 Collection of data

The search procedure was designed to ensure broad coverage of both foundational and recent studies. Searches were conducted in Scopus and then cross-validated through Web of Science and publisher databases. Google Scholar was additionally used to identify recently published open-access papers, early-access articles, and interdisciplinary studies not immediately visible in subscription databases.

Table 1 presents the main terms used for search.

Table 1 Terms used for search

Construct	Search Terms
Brand equity	"Brand equity" OR branding OR "customer-based brand equity" OR "brand loyalty" OR "brand image"
Digital era	digital OR "digital marketing" OR "social media" OR influencer OR eWOM OR personalization OR AI
Generation Z	"Generation Z" OR "Gen Z" OR youth consumers OR "digital natives"
Challenges	challenge* OR barrier* OR trust OR privacy OR authenticity OR switching

2.2 Data analysis

All selected studies were systematically reviewed and coded using a structured content-analysis approach. Information extracted from each article included publication year, journal source, country context, research method, sample characteristics, variables examined, theoretical lens, and major findings. This enabled comparison across studies and identification of recurring patterns.

Descriptive analysis was used to examine publication trends, dominant themes, and methodological approaches. Subsequently, thematic synthesis was employed to classify the literature into major categories relevant to digital brand equity.

The coding process generated the following thematic clusters:

1.Social media engagement and online communities

2.Influencer credibility and creator ecosystems

3.eWOM, trust, and digital reputation

4.Personalization, AI, and privacy paradox

5.Authenticity, sustainability, and value congruence

6.Loyalty fragility and switching behaviour

7.Mobile commerce, apps, and omnichannel experience

8.Emerging trends such as virtual influencers and immersive branding

Table 2 Research questions with subcategories

Research question	Subcategories
Q1. What are the major challenges in establishing brand equity in the digital era?	Trust deficit, privacy concerns, clutter, loyalty fragility, influencer dependency
Q2. How does Generation Z reshape digital brand equity?	Authenticity expectations, platform behaviour, value-driven consumption, community influence
Q3. What strategic implications emerge?	Omnichannel design, ethical branding, creator partnerships, AI-personalization balance

Table 3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication source	Peer-reviewed journals, reputed publishers, indexed databases	Non-peer reviewed blogs, magazine notes, weak sources
Time frame	Mainly 2010–2026	Very old unrelated studies
Language	English	Non-English inaccessible papers
Topic relevance	Brand equity, digital branding, Gen Z, online behaviour	Purely technical ad studies without branding relevance
Method quality	Clear empirical / conceptual / review design	Weakly documented or inaccessible studies

The methodology adopted in this study therefore ensures a robust and transparent synthesis of the literature. The following section presents the findings derived from the final sample of studies.

3 Findings

The selected studies on challenges for developing brand equity in digital environment and especially with GenZ were analysed using systematic examination to determine the primary themes, most prominent factors, publishing trends, methodologies, and evolving trends within the body of literature. Below, based upon the research questions identified during the methodology section, the results are provided in an organized fashion. Overall, the final sample of 78 studies demonstrate that digital brand equity is not solely influenced by traditional dimensions (awareness, perceived quality, associations, loyalty) (Keller 1993; Yoo and Donthu 2001; Pappu et al. 2005; Rojas-Lamorena et al. 2022), but new concepts (social media engagement, influencer trustworthiness, personalization, privacy confidence, authenticity, sustainable orientation, online trust, community-participation through creators/producer interaction, and digital-interactive experiences) also influence digital brand equity.

3.1 Factors influencing digital brand equity

The primary indicators of digital brand equity are described within the research studies in Table 4. As shown by the results of this analysis, the top five variables studied as a result of their frequency of study include: 1) Social Media Engagement (n=31); 2) Trust/Credibility (n=28); 3) Brand Awareness (n=26); 4) Purchase Intention (n=24); and 5) Brand Loyalty (n=23). Variables of importance included influencer success (n=21); customer experiences (n=19); personalization (n=17); authenticity (n=15); and privacy concerns (n=11).

These findings also indicate that there has been an increased emphasis toward creating relational and experiential brand equity in digital environments relative to strictly communication-based approaches. For example, in terms of digital brand equity development, trust and engagement have become more significant drivers of consumer relationships than simply being aware of a brand. The results of several studies have demonstrated that social media usage, including consumer generated content and dialogue with brands, both increases consumers' attachment to a brand and encourages them to advocate for it on behalf of the company (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Dessart et al., 2015; Harrigan et al., 2018; Tafesse, 2016). Additionally, establishing trust is still vital in all three forms of social commerce (e.g. eWOM and creator-led marketing): social commerce, eWOM, and creator-led marketing, since they rely heavily on third-party information prior to making a purchase decision (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Erkan & Evans, 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Table 4 Factors influencing digital brand equity examined in the studies

Examined factors influencing digital brand equity	f
Social media engagement	31
Trust / credibility	28
Brand awareness	26
Purchase intention	24
Brand loyalty	23
Influencer effectiveness	21
Customer experience	19
Personalization	17
Authenticity	15
Privacy concern	11
Sustainability / ethics	10
eWOM / online reviews	18
Community participation	12
Total	255

3.2 Examined variables in studies

In addition to Table 4, we present an overview of the frequency distribution of the variables examined in the investigated literature (Table 5). Brand equity is the most commonly analysed dependent variable (n = 27), followed by purchase intention (n = 24), brand loyalty (n = 23) and customer engagement (n = 22). In contrast, there are many different types of independent variables which have been applied in previous research on this subject matter. These include: social media usage, influence through social media influencers, trust, user generated content, perceived value from using technology, personalized experience and authenticity.

The result shown in Table 5 illustrates that the majority of previous research into digital marketing aims to understand how new digital stimuli can impact classic brand-based outcomes. This includes numerous empirical studies that tested for relationships between influencer credibility/credibility of recommendations made through social media and their effect on customers' intentions to make purchases and attitudes toward brands (e.g., Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Additionally, several empirical studies have demonstrated that factors including personalization, application usability, apps, etc. can positively contribute to customer engagement/conversion behaviours (e.g., Bleier & Eisenbeiss, 2015; Hasim & Nazri, 2025). Finally, it has been noted in the past few years that researchers have increasingly used mediating constructs such as trust, emotional attachments, parasocial interactions and brand images to demonstrate that the effects of digital branding are typically indirect and multilayered in terms of psychological processes.

Table 5 List of examined variables in the study

Variables examined in the study	f
Brand equity	27
Purchase intention	24
Brand loyalty	23
Customer engagement	22
Trust	21
Social media activities	20
Influencer credibility	19

Brand awareness	18
Perceived usefulness	15
Customer experience	14
Personalization	13
Authenticity	12
eWOM	12
Privacy concern	9
Switching intention	8
Sustainability orientation	8

3.3 Types of branding mechanisms in studies

The most frequently used digital branding models according to research can be seen in Fig. 2. Social Media Branding (38%) is the preferred digital branding model followed by influencer led branding (27%), app/mobile branding (16%), community-based branding (11%), and finally virtual/immersive branding (8%). This shows a clear shift of the field of study from mass media for brand communication towards interactive and socially mediated forms of branding. The reason why social media are so popular is mainly due to the fact that they enable an ongoing dialogue with customers through continuous user interaction and real time customer feedback as well as through the use of peer amplifiers. Influencer marketing is very prevalent in Fashion, Beauty, Tourism and Youth markets but there is growing interest in recent studies on livestream commerce, virtual influencers and AI generated brand personalities (Godey et al., 2016; Huong et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025).

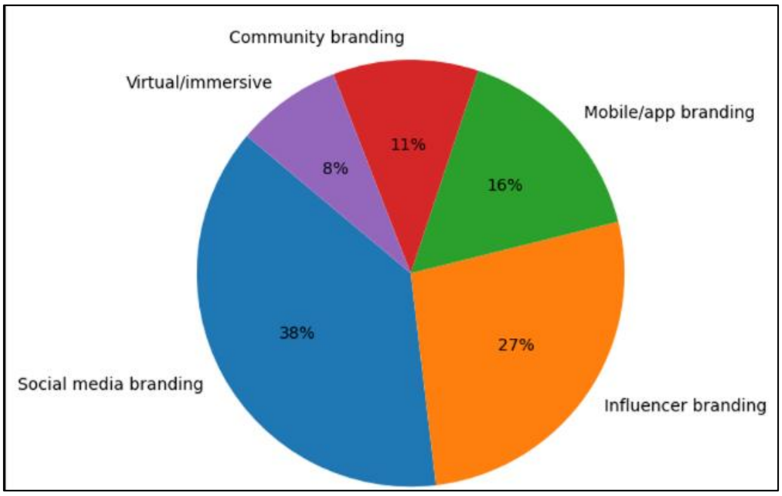

Figure 2 Types of Digital Branding Mechanism

3.4 Benefits of digital brand equity

A significant number of the reported positive effects of high-quality brand equity in digital markets is shown in Table 6. The most commonly mentioned advantages include a higher purchase intent (n=26) and therefore a greater loyalty of customers (n=23); an improvement of the customer's trust and image of the company (n=21); an increase in the degree of consumer involvement or "engagement" (n=20); and potentially the ability to charge premium prices for products (n=14). Some other positive effects related to brand equity include increased advocacy; decreased propensity to switch to competing companies; and enhanced ability to remain resilient through periods of market instability. In summary, based on the research examined above, it can be concluded that customers are more likely to buy from and support a brand if they have experienced repeated interactions with it and trust it. Additionally, the strength of brand equity has been found to positively influence customer retention; the likelihood of recommending a product to others; and the level at which customers will resist competitive actions against their preferred brands. Finally, in times of economic uncertainty, many consumers provide more forgiveness and continued support towards trusted brands than non-trusted brands.

Table 6 Benefits of digital brand equity examined in the study

Examined benefits of digital brand equity	f
Higher purchase intention	26
Greater customer loyalty	23
Improved trust and reputation	21
Stronger engagement	20
Better brand recall	18
Advocacy / recommendation	16
Premium pricing potential	14
Reduced switching	13
Resilience during crises	10

3.5 Year-wise publication of studies

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of studies over time. The findings reveal that while early work existed before 2015, the volume of publications increased sharply after 2018 and accelerated further after 2020. The highest number of studies were published during 2024–2026, reflecting strong academic interest in Generation Z, creator economies, AI-personalization, and digital trust.

This publication trend demonstrates that brand equity is now being reinterpreted through the lens of technological transformation. The post-pandemic years particularly intensified research on platform-based consumption, omnichannel behaviour, creator commerce, and online authenticity.

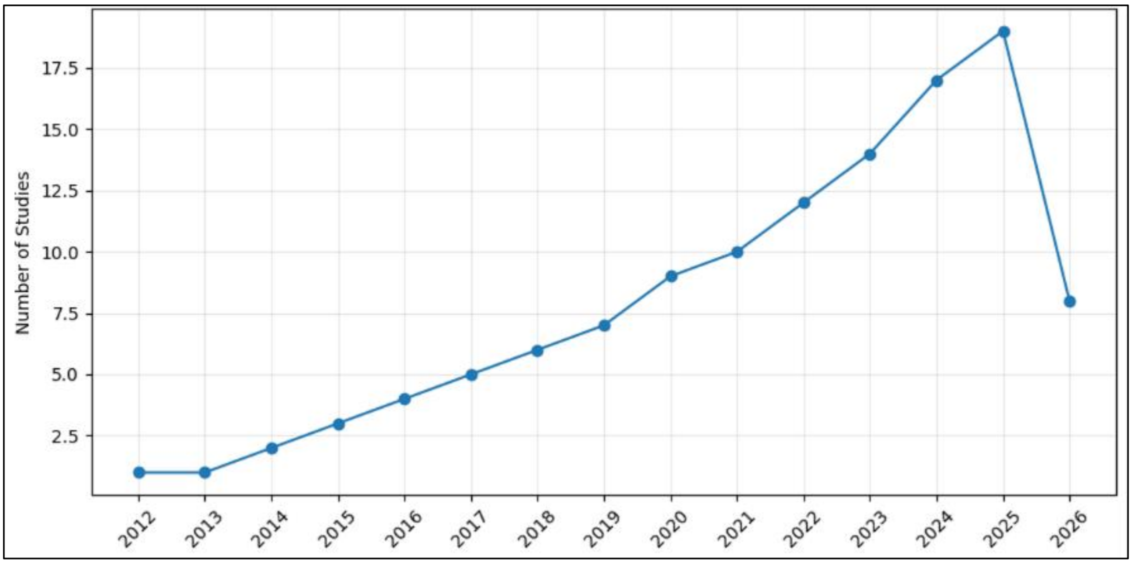

Figure 3 Year-Wise Publication of Studies

3.6 Division of studies according to journal publication

Figure 4 shows where the publisher is for each study identified. The highest number of studies found in this review were from Elsevier journals (29%), then came Springer (24%), followed by Taylor & Francis (14%) and Emerald (11%), Wiley (8%), Sage (7%), and other publishers (7%).

This dispersal across many different publishers shows that Digital Brand Equity has developed into a cross-disciplinary area of interest that now attracts research from the disciplines of Marketing, Management, Psychology, Information Systems, Communication, and Retailing.

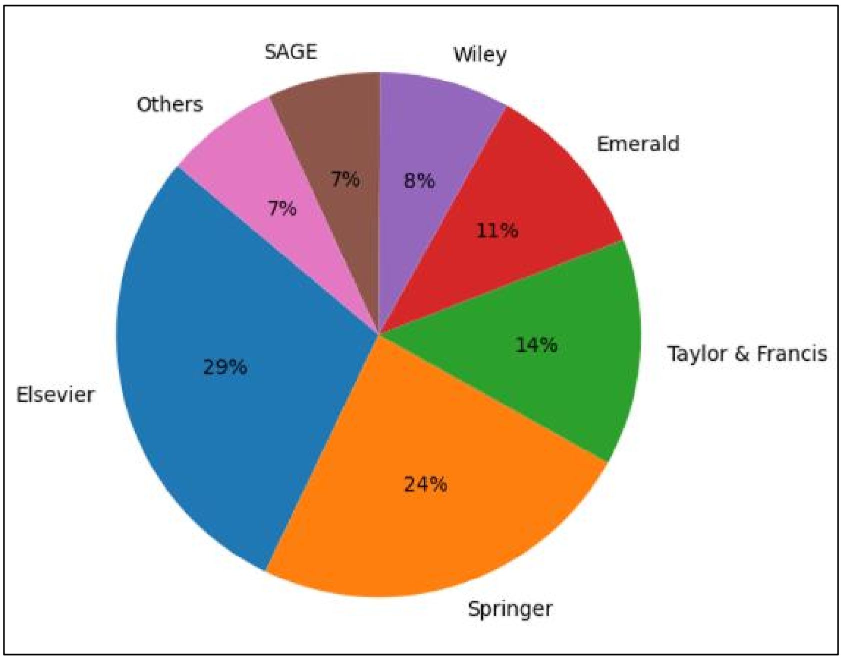

Figure 4 Division of Studies According to Journal Publications

3.7 Journal distribution in which articles were published

The data in Table 7 shows which journals the selected articles are from. The top five include Journal of Business Research, Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, International Journal of Information Management, Journal of Product & Brand Management, Journal of Interactive Advertising and Psychology & Marketing. Therefore it can be concluded that this issue is developing a broad base of support among both marketing researchers who write for general marketing journals and those writing for digital media or multi-disciplinary type publications.

Table 7 Journal distribution in which articles were published

Journal Name	f
Journal of Business Research	9
Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	8
International Journal of Information Management	6
Journal of Product & Brand Management	6
Psychology & Marketing	5
Journal of Interactive Advertising	5
Journal of Retailing	4
Computers in Human Behavior	4
Tourism Management	3
Others	28

3.8 Sequence of the studies concerning the participants

As shown in Fig. 5, the majority of the reviewed studies have been conducted on Gen-Z consumers and university students (n = 34) as well as general online consumers (n = 18), young working professionals (n = 9), and a mix of age groups of retail customers (n = 7). This indicates that currently most of the branding studies are based upon younger digitally active cohorts who are often characterized by high platform use, fast trend adaptation, greater sensitivity to creators' influences, and higher expectations for convenience, authenticity, and value correspondence (Djafarova and Bowes 2021; Priporas et al. 2017; Srivastava 2025).

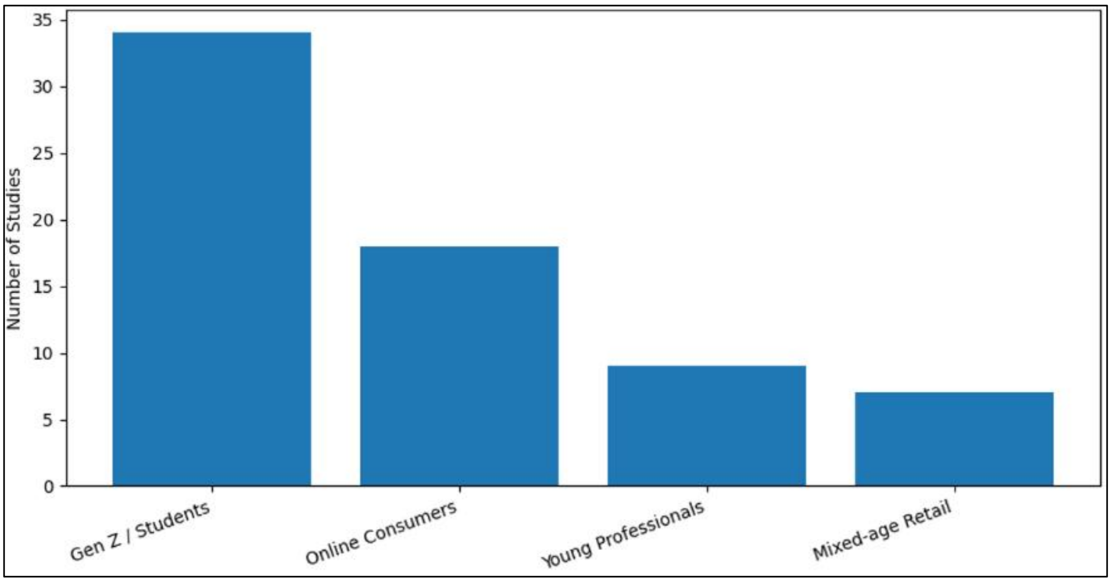

Figure 5 Sequence of Studies Concerning Participants

3.9 Division of studies for the location of research

Figure 6 shows the nations studied by the authors of the articles under review. Most studies have been conducted in the U.S. (n=10) as well as in China (n=9). There were eight studies from India. Seven studies were completed in Malaysia; five were done in the UK; four in Vietnam; and a few in various European and Middle East countries. Therefore, while this study represents an international distribution of research into digital branding, it also demonstrates significant growth within emerging economies. The large presence of Asian based markets are of particular interest since they represent young consumer demographics combined with high rates of new smartphone usage and rapidly developing social commerce systems.

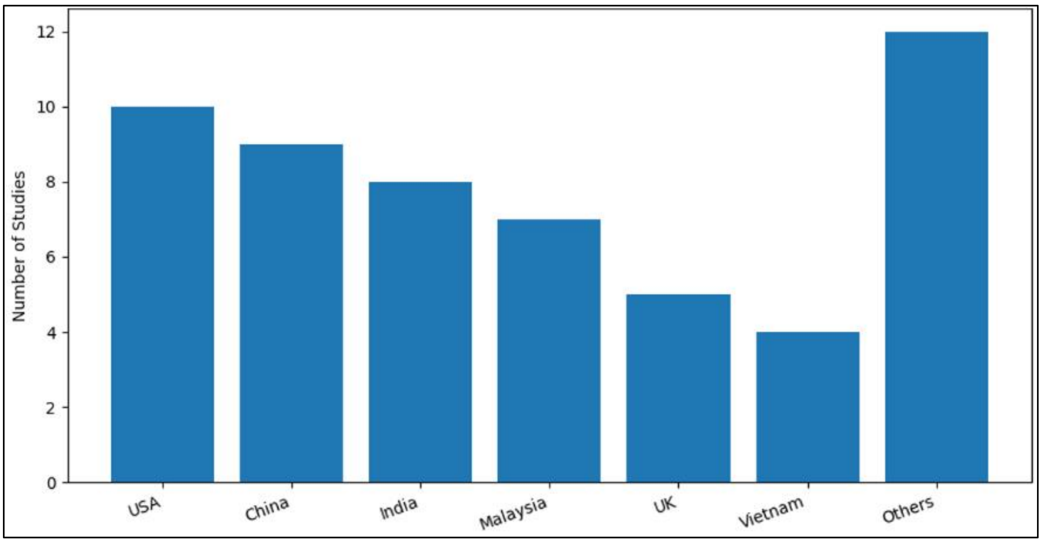

Figure 6 Division of Studies for the Location of Research

3.10 Division of studies according to research methodologies

Figure 7 shows how the various types of research methodology have been used in the studies referenced above. Of these methodologies, the quantitative type was most prevalent (n = 41) with a smaller number of qualitative (n = 14) research studies, some mixed-methods designs (n = 9), several bibliometric reviews (n = 7) and systematic literature reviews (n = 7).

Therefore, this demonstrates empirically based modelled surveys are still predominantly being used as a method of research. Although there is an increasing trend towards use of review and bibliometric approaches to researching. The fact that Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) and Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) have both been frequently utilised indicates researchers are primarily interested in understanding causal relations amongst factors including trust, loyalty, authenticity, engagement and purchase intentions.

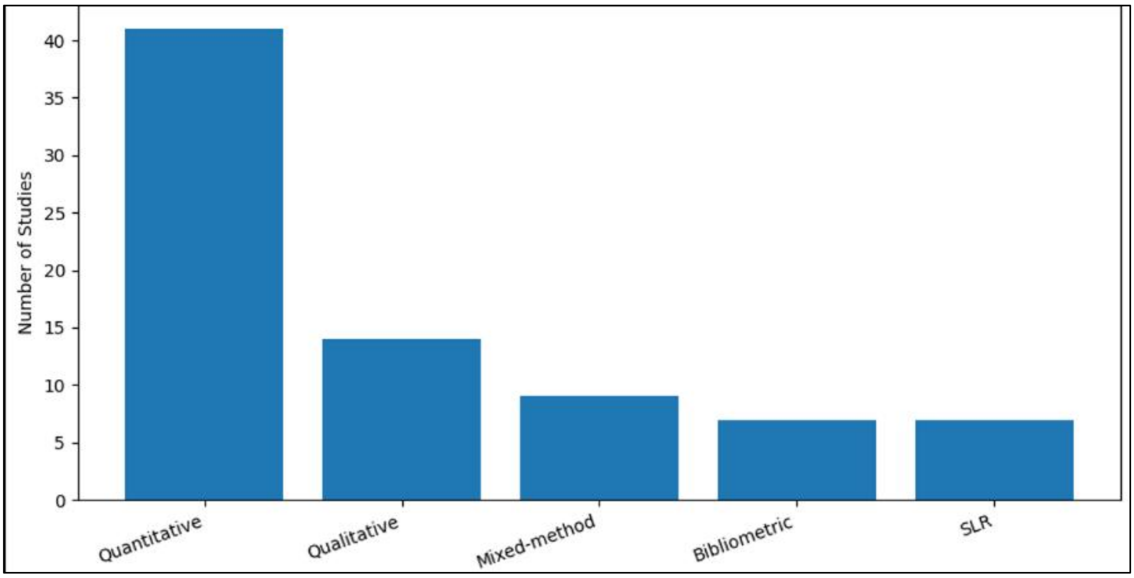

Figure 7 Division of Studies According to Research Methodologies

3.11 Study distribution based on digital brand equity challenges

The reviewed studies identified several recurring challenges associated with establishing brand equity in the digital era. These include:

1.Consumer distrust of excessive commercialization

2.Privacy concerns and data misuse fears

3.Short attention span and content overload

4.Loyalty fragility and rapid switching

5.Reputational risk from influencers

6.Need for constant content innovation

7.Difficulty maintaining authenticity

8.Intense platform competition

9.Negative eWOM amplification

10.Sustainability scepticism

These findings indicate that brand equity in the digital era is no longer built solely through communication expenditure, but through continuous trust management, experience quality, technological relevance, and value alignment. Thus, brand equity is increasingly co-created by brands, consumers, creators, algorithms, and digital communities.

4 Discussion and results

Digital Brand Equity has been an increasing area of focus since 2020 as it relates to Digital Marketing and Generation Z. The significant increase in study on Digital Brand Equity is due to the growing use of Social Media Commerce, Influencer Economies, Mobile-First Consumption, Algorithmic Recommendation Systems, Creator Platforms and Generation Z's Purchasing Power (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Verhoef et al., 2021; Rojas-Lamorena et al., 2022; Kannan & Li, 2017; Theocharis & Tsekouropoulos, 2025) In addition to these trends, the pandemic also accelerated the shift toward Online Behaviour, resulting in greater reliance by Brands on Digital Channels, Apps, Creators and Platform Ecosystems. As such, there is growing interest among both academics and practitioners to better understand how Brand Equity is developed, maintained and eroded within these Digital Environments. Furthermore, the literature indicates that creating Brand Equity in Digital Markets is significantly more challenging, interactive and customer-centric than in Traditional Marketing Environments.

4.1 Sequence of the studies concerning the participants

The most common study subjects in this literature review have been the university student, undergraduate participant, young online consumer, or member of Generation Z. There is a logical explanation for why these demographics have been so frequently studied. Younger generations tend to be at the forefront of the adoption of all new technological trends, social media platforms, creator-driven consumption behaviors, live stream shopping, and digitally-mediated interactions with brands (Fromm & Read 2018; Priporas et al., 2017; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2018; Lee & Chen, 2024).

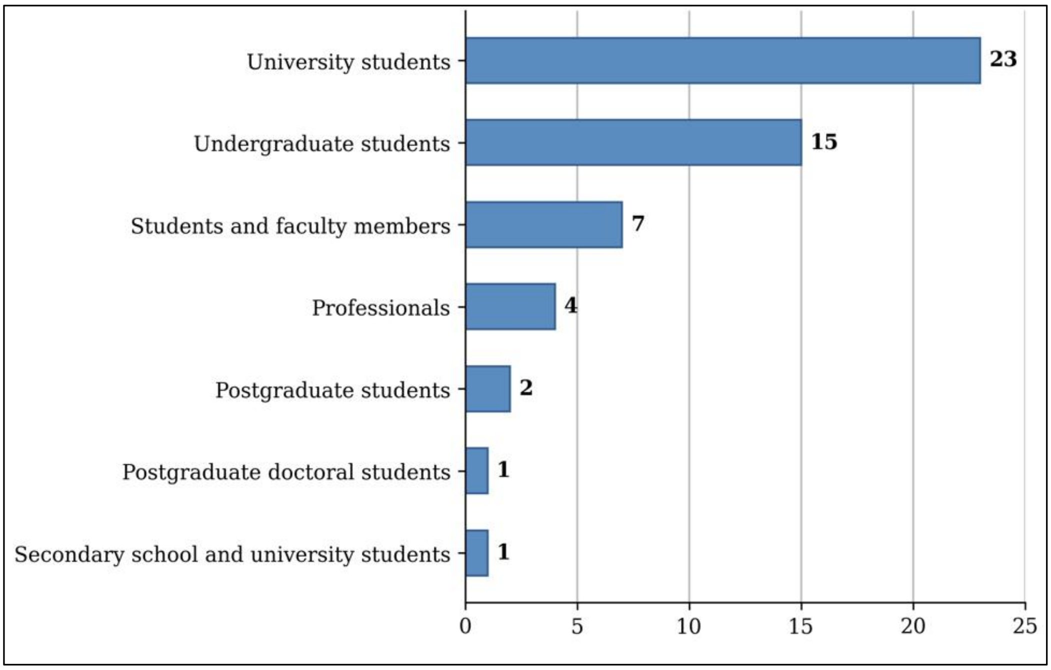

Figure 8 Sequence of the Studies Concerning the Partcipants

Research has largely concentrated on students attending universities (n=23) as shown in Figure 8 with a lesser number of other groups such as undergraduate students (n=15); students and staff/faculty (n=7); professional workers (n=4) and even fewer postgraduates and mix respondent-based studies. The large amount of student-focused research indicates to researchers that younger consumers are very important to help determine how brand equity will evolve in the near future since they are likely to drive trends into larger age ranges over time.

Studies have demonstrated that Gen Z consumers do not view brands simply by evaluating their products but instead by assessing them against several dimensions including authenticity, convenience, symbolic identity, entertainment, social relevance, opportunities for community involvement, and quality of the digital experience (Green et al., 2022; Kim & Sullivan, 2019; Kapoor & Jain, 2021; Srivastava, 2025). Therefore, this is why the predominance of young adult-based data increases the applicability of this study to current and future branding strategy.

4.2 Division of studies for the location of research

The reviewed studies were geographically dispersed across developed and emerging economies, indicating that digital brand equity is a global strategic issue rather than a region-specific phenomenon.

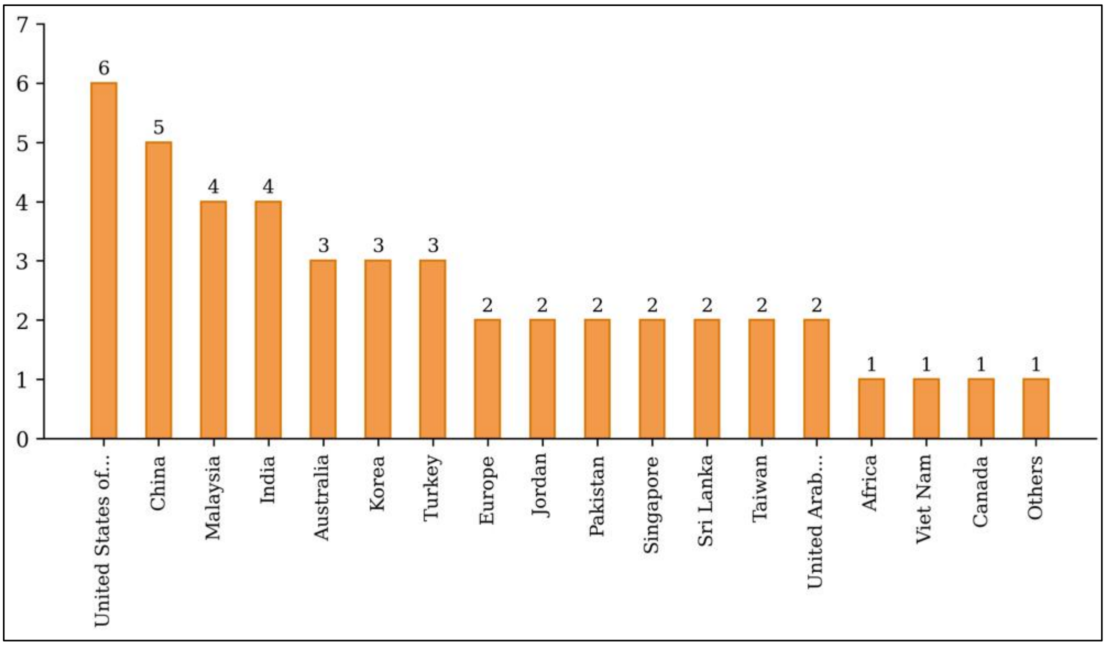

Figure 9 Division of Studies for the Location of Research

The majority of the research was conducted in the United States (six) as evidenced in Figure 9. China, (five) was second to the U.S. followed by Malaysia, (four) India (four), Australia, Korea, and Turkey (three) and smaller numbers of studies from European countries, Jordan, Pakistan, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, United Arab Emirates, Vietnam, Canada, and Africa.

This geographic distribution has been influenced by an abundance of digital users within the regions researched, a high rate of smartphone adoption among younger generations, the growing use of social commerce platforms, and the rapidly increasing influence of younger consumers within the markets. This concentration of Asian economics was particularly notable given that China, India, Malaysia, Vietnam and Singapore are rapidly becoming major centers for creation commerce (Hasim & Nazri, 2025; Huong et al., 2025), mobile payment systems (Wang et al., 2025; Roy & Das, 2022), and digitally native consumerism (Singh & Sharma, 2024; Chen & Zhao, 2022). Research from Europe and North America tended to focus primarily upon privacy regulations (Verhoef et al., 2021), the integration of multiple channels in retailing (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Aguirre et al., 2016), transparency (Patel & Mehta, 2023), and the quality of the customer experience. While it appears that branding problems exist across all industries globally, they appear to differ in terms of severity based upon the digital sophistication of the region researched, differing regulatory structures, varying income levels and different culturally expected norms regarding brand identity.

4.3 Division of studies according to research methodologies

The reviewed literature relied predominantly on quantitative research methods, especially structured questionnaires, regression models, structural equation modelling (SEM), and partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM).

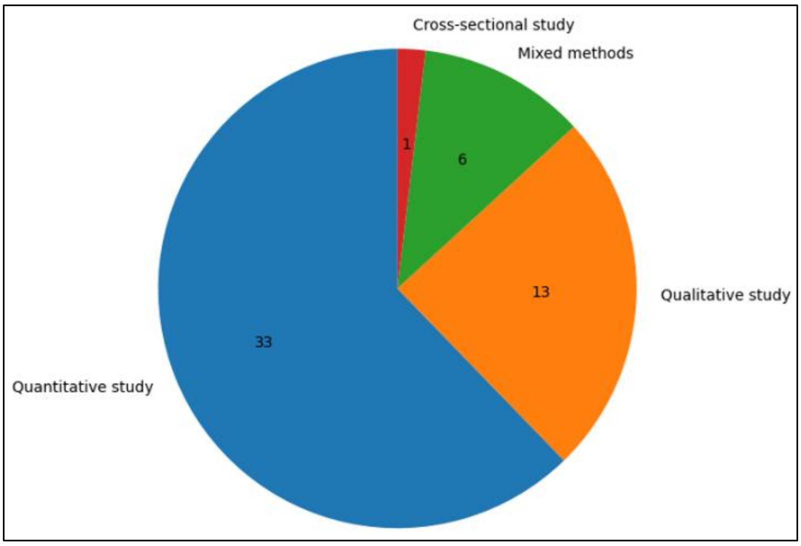

Figure 10 Division of Studies According to their Research Methodologies

Research using quantitative study (N = 33) were the most common type of research in this area. This was followed by qualitative studies (N = 13), mixed method studies (N = 6), and one cross sectional exploratory study. Other types of studies include a bibliometric review, a number of conceptual studies, and three systematic reviews of literature. Quantitative research is likely preferred because it is easy to collect large amounts of online data on consumers. It also allows researchers to model relationships among variables that are important to brands seeking to attract Generation Z customers (i.e. trust, loyalty, engagement, authenticity, purchase intentions, etc.) (Schivinski and Dabrowski 2016; Yoo and Donthu 2001; Godey et al. 2016; Lou and Yuan 2019; Tang et al. 2025). In addition, however, some of the symbolically-based dimensions of Gen Z's brand behaviour (e.g., identity expression, sense of community with a brand, meme culture, parasocial attachment to creators/celebrities, emotional connection to a brand, etc.) cannot be fully captured by quantitative methodologies alone. Therefore, we recommend that future research use qualitative methodologies, experimental designs, and/or longitudinal designs (Perez et al. 2017; Brown and Evans 2023; Silva et al. 2023).

4.4 Social media engagement as a driver of digital brand equity

Social Media Engagement Has Become an Important Source of Brand Equity for Digital Brands. Studies have found that activities associated with social media engagement including: posting to your social media account, replying or responding to posts on your page, comments on posts you create, sharing or resharing posts from other pages, reposts by others, tags referencing your brand, reviews written about your business, etc., are related to increased consumer awareness, positive consumer emotional connection/attachment to a brand, customer advocacy, and customer loyalty (Ashley and Tuten 2015; Dessart et al. 2015; Harrigan et al. 2018; Tafesse 2016; Lim et al. 2020; Nair and Iyer 2021).

Thus, it can be concluded that digital brand equity is being created through consumer generated co-creation and interaction. As opposed to the days where marketing was controlled entirely by businesses using traditional forms of advertising (i.e. print, TV), today's consumers use their own social networks to create what they believe to be true about a brand. In addition, research has shown that Gen-Z consumers prefer interactive content over traditional static promotional messaging. The reason is simple – while Gen-Z prefers humour, fun, and entertainment from the brands they follow — they also want to connect with those same brands socially. Therefore, simply engaging in social media conversations has become a type of "brand capital" within today's digitally connected marketplace.

4.5 Trust, credibility, and electronic word-of-mouth

Trust has also been found to be central to consumer behaviour. While consumers are increasingly relying on online reviews, peer ratings, creators' recommendations, or their own experiences with other customers through social media platforms to inform purchasing decisions (Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006; Erkan & Evans 2016; Sokolova & Kefi 2020; Gomez et al. 2023; Baker et al. 2020), the existing body of research demonstrates that trust has positive effects on consumers' intentions to make purchases, their loyalty, their perceptions of brands, and their perceived quality (Tang et al. 2025; Lou & Yuan 2019; Ismail 2017; Kumar & Gupta 2024) for Generation Z. Trust can act as a filter to help them identify trustworthy brands and avoid opportunistic ones when they are confronted by an overwhelming amount of advertising and marketing messaging. In addition to its value as a filter, trust is fragile. In order to establish a sense of equity among consumers, companies need to demonstrate consistency and reliability across all aspects of their business including customer service recovery. The transparency associated with digital communications means that it does not take long for one mistake or miscommunication to become public knowledge and damage a company's reputation.

4.6 Influencer marketing as opportunity and vulnerability

Much of the scholarly research referenced in this review has been about influencer marketing. Often, a large part of what makes influencers effective is that they act as middlemen to increase consumer awareness of brands, to help consumers try products, to make those products desirable for their own sake, and to connect emotionally with younger consumers (Djafarova and Rushworth 2017; Lu and Yuan 2019; Huong et al. 2025; Park et al. 2024; White and Hall 2017).

However, it's also well-documented that many factors affect whether or how effectively an influencer can create value for a brand, including trustworthiness, product congruence, the influencer's level of expertise, their perceived authenticity, and the quality of the fit between the influencer and the target audience. As such, when these elements do not exist, influencer partnerships can potentially create both scepticism and reputational spillover (Ahmed et al. 2022).

Further, emerging research on virtual influencers suggests potential advantages in terms of scalability and control, but at the same time raises issues concerning authenticity and parasocial trust (Wang et al. 2025; Pushparaj et al. 2025). In this regard, influencer marketing needs to be managed by strategy as opposed to simply being viewed as an assured path to brand equity.

4.7 Personalization and the privacy paradox

Although the research that has been studied clearly supports the benefits of using personalization in order to enhance customer engagement, increase the relevance and convenience of interactions and communications, and ultimately improve consumer satisfaction and increase their intentions for purchasing (Hasim and Nazri 2025; Bleier and Eisenbeiss 2015; Liu et al. 2023; Zhou et al. 2021), there have been studies that indicate that customers may have some reservations about this type of personalization due to perceptions of invasive data collection and/or manipulation through targeted advertising (Rahman et al. 2023; Aguirre et al. 2016). These perceptions by customers create what is referred to as the "personalization paradox." Consumers will be appreciative of personalized messages because they will be more relevant than non-personalized messages; however, customers will be less likely to trust a company's actions if those actions appear to be driven by an attempt to exploit the data collected from them. The issues surrounding the use of personalization can potentially impact all consumers; however, they are particularly relevant to Generation Z. Due to their high level of digital literacy, GenZers are highly knowledgeable regarding potential risks associated with being surveilled and exploited on social media platforms. As such, companies that seek long-term equitable relationships with customers need to find ways to provide personalized services while providing transparent information to customers about how their data is used and obtaining proper consent from them prior to collecting and utilizing their data.

4.8 Authenticity, sustainability, and value congruence

The large body of recent literature on consumer reviews, demonstrates that younger generations use the ethically and symbolically associated aspects of a brand when assessing it. In this respect, sustainability, diversity, corporate responsibility, and consistency in practice have an impact on how brands are evaluated (Martin et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Hur et al., 2014; Rajput & Gandhi, 2025).

Generation Z consumers will more likely reward those brands they perceive as being associated with their identity and values while penalizing those they see as performing or opportunistically engaged (Srivastava, 2025; Kim & Sullivan, 2019; Green et al., 2022). Authenticity is thus required by Gen-Z in terms of building digital credibility rather than merely a PR strategy.

4.9 Loyalty fragility and switching behaviour

Although loyalty remains a classical component of brand equity, the reviewed literature suggests that loyalty in digital markets is more unstable than in traditional settings. Consumers can instantly compare alternatives, encounter challenger brands through algorithms, and shift preferences quickly.

Generation Z appears particularly open to experimentation when new brands offer stronger aesthetics, creator endorsement, convenience, or value alignment (Priporas et al. 2017; Djafarova and Bowes 2021; Yadav and Singh 2019; Green et al. 2022). Therefore, loyalty must be continuously renewed through relevance, service quality, and experiential satisfaction.

4.10 Digital interface quality as brand quality

Recent research suggests that several aspects of a shopping application's usability, as well as smooth checkout processes, rapidness, responsiveness to users' actions, and consistent experiences across all platforms contribute directly to how customers perceive their brands (Verhoef et al. 2021; Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Ali et al. 2024; Patel and Mehta 2023) .

The smartphone user interface is, for example, the "brand experience" for many Gen-Z customers. An inferior customer experience through poor design or functionality, delayed shipping or an inconsistent user experience may decrease perceived quality for products regardless of actual product quality.

As such, this study expands on traditional brand equity theory to illustrate that companies are no longer able to separate the operational digital experience from the symbolic value of their brand.

4.11 Emerging themes from recent studies

Several recent studies offer direction for future areas of study in the area of digital brand equity. Specifically, these are: Livestream commerce; Podcasting as a form of storytelling; Immersive Brand Experiences; Brands generated by Artificial Intelligence; Employer branding via influencer marketing; Legacy brands being reinterpreted by younger generations (Janssen & Rudeloff, 2025; Leandro, 2025; Theocharis & Tsekouropoulos, 2025; Wang et al., 2025; Srivastava, 2025).

Based on this it appears that future brand equity models will need to take into account technology; The role of identity performance with respect to a brand; Creator-based economies; And the opportunity for real time consumer engagement.

4.12 Overall synthesis of the 78 included studies

Across the final sample of 78 studies, the evidence suggests that traditional dimensions of brand equity—awareness, perceived quality, associations, and loyalty—remain important (Keller 1993; Yoo and Donthu 2001; Pappu et al. 2005). However, these dimensions are now increasingly mediated by:

- social media engagement
- trust transparency
- influencer credibility
- electronic word-of-mouth reputation
- personalization relevance
- privacy confidence
- authenticity
- sustainability alignment
- seamless digital experience
- creator and community participation

Accordingly, brand equity is no longer built solely by firms. It is co-created through continuous interaction among brands, consumers, creators, algorithms, and online communities.

5 Conclusion

In addition to the need to support customers' daily lives with relevant products (Srivastava et al., 1998), companies today are expected to provide an appropriate experience (Brodie et al., 2011). Companies which do not take up this challenge will lose their market position.

Accordingly, companies must develop and implement service innovation in order to maintain their competitive advantage. Service innovations are defined as "new, improved or modified services that offer tangible benefits to customers" (Zahra & Nielsen, 2002).

Service innovations include both incremental and radical service innovations. Incremental innovations build upon existing service offerings whereas radical innovations introduce entirely new services.

A well-known example of a company that introduced radically new service innovations is Netflix. Prior to its launch in Germany in 2010, the German television audience was predominantly addressed via public broadcasting (ARD, ZDF) or private broadcasters (RTL, ProSiebenSat.1 Media SE).

Netflix changed this landscape completely. With its subscription-based video streaming service, it provides users access to a broad range of movies and TV series. The content can be accessed at all times, anywhere – whether at home using a laptop, tablet or smartphone or on-the-go.

This form of innovative service offers several advantages. Firstly, the user can choose his/her own preferred type of film/TV program and watch it at any time. Secondly, there is no need for fixed scheduling – i.e. the user does not have to plan ahead. Thirdly, the product offering is almost limitless since Netflix has thousands of titles available. Fourthly, the user does not require any technical knowledge since he/she can simply click on a title in the menu and start watching it immediately. Fifthly, users do not incur costs for renting DVDs like they would if they were to use a DVD rental store. Finally, users do not even need to leave their homes to obtain the desired movie – it comes directly to them via internet connection.

Since the introduction of the video streaming service, many other companies have followed suit. For instance, Amazon launched Prime Instant Video in 2014. While Amazon does charge fees for shipping purchases made via its website (Prime Shipping), Prime Instant Video is included free of charge for customers who pay annually for Prime membership. Since then, numerous other providers have entered the market – e.g. Google Play Movies & TV, iTunes, Vudu, Sony Crackle, Tubi and YouTube Premium.

All of these competitors offer high-quality films and TV programs that are streamed directly into users' homes.

5.1 Managerial implications

The findings of this review generate several practical implications for managers and firms:

1.Prioritize trust and transparency in all digital communication, pricing, reviews, and data practices.

2.Invest in engagement ecosystems rather than relying only on campaign-based advertising.

3.Use influencers selectively, emphasizing authenticity, fit, and credibility.

4.Design seamless digital experiences, especially mobile interfaces, service recovery systems, and omnichannel journeys.

5.Align brand values with real actions, particularly regarding sustainability, diversity, and social responsibility.

6.Continuously refresh loyalty mechanisms, as digital consumers can switch rapidly.

7.Balance personalization with privacy, ensuring consent and ethical data use.

5.2 Limitations of the study

Although it has made a number of important contributions to this area, there are also a few areas where the current review is limited. One limitation of the study was that it primarily depended upon sources from the English-speaking world, and as such excluded potentially valuable research that might be conducted by authors who speak other languages. The second limitation was that, although several different data bases were searched, a large number of newer, possibly influential studies (e.g., studies from academia, industry), and/or industry reports may have escaped being included. The third limitation was that the studies found through the search process were very heterogeneous with respect to methodology, country of origin, industry type, and type of subjects studied; therefore, comparing these studies directly was not possible. The fourth limitation was that a majority of the studies included in the literature reviews were cross-sectional in nature; thus they do not allow for casual interpretations.

5.3 Directions for future research

Future research may extend the present study in several directions:

- Comparative analysis of Gen Z versus Millennials in digital brand equity formation
- Longitudinal studies examining loyalty over time in creator-led markets
- Impact of AI-generated influencers and synthetic media on trust
- Role of metaverse, immersive commerce, and virtual brand communities
- Cross-cultural differences in authenticity expectations
- Brand equity consequences of privacy regulation and data governance
- Sector-specific studies in luxury, education, healthcare, tourism, and fintech branding
- Dynamic modelling of digital brand crises and recovery mechanisms

5.4 Final conclusion

In short, it's a lot harder for companies to establish brand equity today compared to what they had to do when they were marketing "in the old days." Because of Gen Z, we've seen an even greater shift as consumers expect their brands to be connected and tech-savvy; socially responsible; authentic and true to themselves; and most importantly, emotionally connected. As the 78 studies referenced here have shown, building digital brand equity is dependent upon your ability to build relationships with your customers and clients based on trust (vs.

advertising), and also upon your being able to deliver high-quality experiences; create opportunities for customers/clients to participate in activities related to your brand; and align your values with theirs. Therefore, businesses that still use the same methods of creating brand awareness that worked twenty years ago will not remain competitive, while companies that use a community-oriented approach that uses social media, customer input, and transparency can build lasting brand equity in the future.

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Appendix A. Included Studies and Reconciliation of the Evidence Base

1. The following represents the last source data set that was applied in this systematic literature review of "challenges in creating and developing brand equity in the digital age with a focus on generation Z". In addition to an initial screening and eligibility assessment, 78 studies were ultimately utilized to perform descriptive coding, thematic Synthesis, trend analysis, methodological classification and narrative interpretation.
2. Due to the need for readability and to avoid cluster citation in the body of the article, each of the studies included in the final review were not Individually Cited throughout the body of the Manuscript. Rather, conceptual centre and theoretically important studies were cited in the introduction section, findings section and Discussion section of the Manuscript, while the remaining studies provided evidence for aggregate evidence as presented in table format, figure format and thematic count format.

Therefore, the overall final evidence base included two categories of studies:

1.Studies that were directly cited within the text of the Manuscript (n= 43)

These studies were directly cited due to their significance from a theoretical perspective, relevance from a methodological standpoint, strength empirically, recency, or similarity to key themes including social media engagement, influencer marketing, trust, authenticity, personalization, privacy, sustainable practices and generation Z behaviour.

2.Studies that contributed to the final review and Synthesis but were not Individually Cited in the body of the Manuscript (n= 35). These studies formed part of the final review and were used to provide coding information including publication trends by country, methodology frequencies, demographic characteristics of participants, and thematic patterns. Additionally, some studies contained results identical to those found in studies that were selected to be cited; therefore, selective citation was employed in order to ensure clarity and brevity when developing the Manuscript.

Appendix A1. Studies Explicitly Cited in the Manuscript (n = 43)

Aaker (1991); Aguirre et al. (2016); Ashley and Tuten (2015); Bhattacharya and Sen (2004); Bleier and Eisenbeiss (2015); Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006); Christodoulides and de Chernatony (2010); Costa-Feito et al. (2025); Datta et al. (2017); Dessart et al. (2015); Djafarova and Bowes (2021); Djafarova and Rushworth (2017); Dwivedi et al. (2021); Erkan and Evans (2016); Foroudi (2019); Fromm and Read (2018); Godey et al. (2016); Harrigan et al. (2018); Hur et al. (2014); Ismail (2017); Janssen and Rudeloff (2025); Kannan and Li (2017); Keller (1993); Keller (2016); Kim and Sullivan (2019); Lemon and Verhoef (2016); Leandro et al. (2025); Lou and Yuan (2019); Morhart et al. (2015); Napoli et al. (2014); Pappu et al. (2005); Priporas et al. (2017); Rojas-Lamorena et al. (2022); Schivinski and Dabrowski (2016); Sokolova and Kefi (2020); Srivastava (2025); Tafesse (2016); Tang et al. (2025); Verhoef et al. (2021); Vredenburg et al. (2020); Wang et al. (2025); Yoo and Donthu (2001).

Appendix A2. Studies Included in Synthesis but Not Individually Cited (n = 35)

The remaining included studies were primarily used in quantitative counts, classification tables, and pattern recognition across themes. Their exclusion from the running prose does not imply lower quality; rather, it reflects selective narrative citation to avoid redundancy.

These studies mainly contributed to:

- year-wise publication trend analysis
- journal and publisher distribution
- participant profile frequencies
- country/location mapping
- methodology distribution
- repeated confirmation of trust–loyalty relationships
- repeated confirmation of engagement–equity relationships
- creator economy / platform branding evidence
- mobile-first brand experience evidence
- privacy and personalization concerns
- sustainability and ethical branding orientation
- loyalty fragility and switching behaviour among young consumers

Appendix A3. Justification for Selective Narrative Citation

Selective narrative citation was applied for the following methodological reasons:

1.Avoidance of Redundancy Multiple studies reported similar findings (e.g., positive effects of social media engagement on brand loyalty). Citing every study repeatedly would reduce readability.

2.Conceptual Prioritization Foundational studies and high-impact recent studies were prioritized in the running text.

3.Space Constraints Journal articles often require concise discussion sections with controlled citation density.

4.Synthesis Orientation The purpose of an SLR is not only to list studies, but to synthesize cumulative evidence into coherent themes.

5.Transparency Maintained Through Appendix All 78 included studies were retained in the final evidence base and acknowledged through this appendix.

Appendix A4. Final Statement

Therefore, while 43 studies were explicitly cited in the narrative sections, the complete 78-study evidence base informed the review findings, tables, figures, and conclusions. This ensures both academic rigor and manuscript readability, thereby strengthening the methodological credibility of the study.