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Emotions as Drivers of Brand Loyalty Among Generation Z Consumers: Evidence from an Urban Indian Market

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the role of emotions in shaping brand loyalty among Generation Z (Gen Z) consumers in an urban Indian context. Drawing on Attachment Theory, the Affect Infusion Model (AIM), and Commitment Trust Theory, six emotional constructs were examined: emotional attachment, positive affect, brand trust, perceived brand authenticity, gratitude, and digital emotional engagement. A quantitative survey of $n = 134$ Gen Z adults (aged 18–28) in Bengaluru was conducted using a structured Likertscale instrument. Statistical analyses including descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multiple regression were used to test eight hypotheses. All eight hypotheses were supported at the $p < .05$ level. Emotional attachment ($\beta = .52$), brand trust ($\beta = .47$), and digital emotional engagement emerged as particularly strong predictors of brand loyalty. Notably, emotional factors explained variance in loyalty beyond the contribution of functional attributes such as price and product quality. Digital engagement moderated the emotion–loyalty relationship, amplifying emotional effects among this cohort. Findings advance theoretical understanding of emotiondriven loyalty in digitally native consumer segments and offer actionable insights for brand managers targeting Gen Z.

KEYWORDS: Brand Loyalty, Generation Z, Emotional Attachment, Brand Trust, Perceived Brand Authenticity, Digital Emotional Engagement, India

I. INTRODUCTION

Generation Z broadly defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012 represents a consumer cohort whose formative experiences were shaped by ubiquitous digital connectivity, social media ecosystems, and an expectation of brand transparency (Deloitte, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2019). As this cohort gains purchasing power, understanding the psychological mechanisms that underpin their brand commitments has become a strategic imperative for marketers worldwide.

Traditional models of brand loyalty emphasize utilitarian drivers: satisfaction, price competitiveness, and functional product performance (Oliver, 1999). While these factors retain relevance, emerging evidence suggests that for digitally native consumers, emotional resonance may be equally if not more determinative of sustained loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Thomson et al., 2005). Emotions mediate how consumers encode brand experiences into memory, regulate interpersonallike bonds with brands, and propagate wordofmouth advocacy in networked environments (Bagozzi et al., 1999).

Despite the growing body of research on consumer emotions, three gaps persist. First, most empirical studies aggregate across generational cohorts, obscuring the distinct emotional architecture of Gen Z consumers. Second, the moderating role of digital engagement channels specifically social media and influencer interactions in the emotionloyalty relationship remains undertheorized. Third, research in the Indian urban market, which combines rapid digital penetration with culturally specific brand relationship norms, is sparse.

This study addresses these gaps by empirically testing a multiconstruct emotional model of brand loyalty among Gen Z consumers in Bengaluru, India. Specifically, it examines how emotional attachment, positive affect, brand trust, perceived authenticity, gratitude, and emotional brand experience individually predict brand loyalty, and how digital emotional engagement moderates these relationships. The study also compares the explanatory power of emotional versus functional loyalty predictors.



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II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 Emotional Attachment and Brand Loyalty

Rooted in Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory, brand attachment refers to the strength of the cognitive and emotional bond between a consumer and a brand (Park et al., 2010). Thomson et al. (2005) operationalized this construct and demonstrated that attachment intensity significantly predicts attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. For Gen Z, whose identity formation is deeply intertwined with brand choices as social signaling, attachment operates as a particularly potent loyalty mechanism.

H1: Emotional attachment has a significant positive impact on brand loyalty among Gen Z consumers.

2.2 Positive Affect and Repeat Purchase Intention

The Affect Infusion Model (Forgas, 1995) posits that prevailing mood states infuse evaluative judgments, including brand assessments. Positive hedonic experiences characterized by joy, excitement, and pride — have been linked to stronger repeat purchase intentions and higher willingness to advocate (Chitturi et al., 2008). Among Gen Z, hedonic brand experiences are amplified by the performative dimension of social sharing; positive emotions become socially visible and reinforcing.

H2: Positive emotions (joy, pride, and excitement) significantly influence repeat purchase intention among Gen Z consumers.

2.3 Brand Trust and Brand Loyalty

Morgan and Hunt (1994) established trust as a cornerstone of relationship marketing, defining it as the confidence that a partner is reliable and has integrity. In brand contexts, trust reduces perceived risk, lowers cognitive load in purchase decisions, and sustains loyalty even in competitive environments (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). For Gen Z consumers who are highly attuned to brand missteps and public accountability, trust is both harder to earn and more powerful in its loyalty effects.

H3: Brand trust has a significant positive relationship with brand loyalty among Gen Z consumers.

2.4 Perceived Brand Authenticity and Emotional Attachment

Perceived brand authenticity reflects a consumer's belief that a brand is genuine, consistent with its stated values, and honest in its communications (Napoli et al., 2014; Beverland, 2005). Authenticity functions as a precondition for deep emotional bonding: when a brand's identity is perceived as real rather than constructed, consumers lower their psychological defenses and form more personal connections (Holt, 2002). Gen Z, socialized in an era of advertising skepticism, is particularly sensitive to authenticity cues.

H4: Perceived brand authenticity positively influences emotional attachment among Gen Z consumers.

2.5 Gratitude and Brand Loyalty

Palmatier et al. (2009) demonstrated that customer gratitude, arising from perceived benevolent brand actions such as ethical sourcing, social responsibility initiatives, and personalized service, generates a reciprocity dynamic that translates into enhanced commitment and repeat patronage. For values-driven Gen Z consumers who explicitly factor corporate ethics into purchase decisions (McKinsey & Company, 2023), gratitude-inducing brand behaviors carry disproportionate loyalty weight.

H5: Gratitude arising from ethical behavior and social responsibility positively affects brand loyalty.

2.6 Emotional Brand Experience and Attitudinal Loyalty

Brakus et al. (2009) conceptualized brand experience as the ensemble of sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli across touchpoints. Attitudinal loyalty — comprising favorable brand evaluation and commitment — is particularly responsive to emotionally rich experiences. For omnichannel Gen Z consumers, consistent emotional resonance across digital and physical touchpoints is essential for sustaining attitudinal loyalty.

H6: Emotional brand experience has a significant positive impact on attitudinal loyalty.

2.7 Digital Emotional Engagement as Moderator

Social media interactions, influencer endorsements, and user-generated content create emotionally charged digital environments that amplify consumer-brand relationships (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Social contagion theory (Hatfield et al., 1993) suggests that emotions propagate through networked digital communities, intensifying individual emotional



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responses. We propose that the level of digital emotional engagement moderates the strength of the emotion–loyalty pathway.

H7: Digital emotional engagement positively moderates the relationship between emotions and brand loyalty.

2.8 Emotional versus Functional Predictors of Loyalty

Oliver (1999) distinguished between behavioral loyalty (repeat purchase) and attitudinal loyalty (commitment and advocacy), noting that the latter is more durable because it is grounded in psychological meaningmaking rather than inertia. We hypothesize that emotional predictors collectively explain a significant and distinct share of loyalty variance, above and beyond functional attributes.

H8: Emotional factors collectively have a stronger influence on brand loyalty than purely functional attributes.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Sample

A cross-sectional quantitative design was adopted. The target population comprised Gen Z consumers (born 1997–2012) residing in Bengaluru, India, a city representing one of India's highest concentrations of digitally active youth. Purposive convenience sampling was employed, targeting university students and young professionals. A final usable sample of $n = 134$ was obtained, exceeding the minimum threshold of 5 responses per survey item recommended for regression-based analyses (Hair et al., 2019).

Demographic breakdown: 56.7% aged 22–25; 29.1% aged 18–21; 14.2% aged 26–28; near-equal gender representation (male: 50.0%, female: 49.3%); predominantly postgraduate (69.4%). Occupationally, 59.0% were students, 28.4% employed, and 12.7% self-employed — reflecting a mix of financially dependent and independent consumers.

3.2 Instrument Development

A structured Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) was developed by adapting validated scales from the extant literature. Emotional attachment items were adapted from Thomson et al. (2005); brand trust from Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001); perceived authenticity from Napoli et al. (2014); brand experience from Brakus et al. (2009); and digital engagement from Lou and Yuan (2019). Positive affect and gratitude scales were developed de novo based on Forgas (1995) and Palmatier et al. (2009) respectively, with content validated by two expert reviewers.

Brand loyalty was measured using a composite scale capturing both attitudinal dimensions (commitment, advocacy intention) and behavioral intentions (repeat purchase, resistance to switching), consistent with Oliver's (1999) multidimensional conceptualization. Functional attribute items covering product quality and price satisfaction were included to enable comparative analysis (H8).

3.3 Data Collection

The survey was administered digitally via Google Forms and distributed through university networks and social media channels between January and March 2025. To ensure relevance, respondents were screened for regular brand engagement. All participation was voluntary, anonymous, and informed; the study adhered to established ethical principles for human subjects research.

3.4 Analytical Approach

Data were analyzed using SPSS v.26. Descriptive statistics and frequency distributions characterized the sample. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to assess bivariate relationships among emotional constructs and loyalty. Multiple linear regression was conducted with brand loyalty as the dependent variable and the six emotional constructs as simultaneous predictors (Model 1), with digital engagement introduced as a moderator (Model 2) via interaction terms. Hierarchical regression was used to assess the incremental explanatory power of emotional factors over functional attributes (H8). The significance threshold was set at $\alpha = .05$ throughout.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Descriptive statistics revealed consistently high levels of emotional engagement across constructs. Notably, 74.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they feel emotionally connected to their favorite brand; 80.6% reported



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positive affect (happiness) during brand usage; and 78.4% stated that social media interactions increase their emotional connection with brands. Product quality (83.6%) and price (79.9%) were identified as the topranked functional loyalty drivers, with emotional connection ranking third (64.9%).

All six emotional predictors were significantly and positively correlated with brand loyalty (all $r > .35$, $p < .01$), with emotional attachment ($r = .61$) and brand trust ($r = .57$) exhibiting the strongest bivariate associations. Interpredictor correlations ranged from .28 to .54, with no evidence of multicollinearity (all VIF < 3.0).

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

Table 1 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis. The full emotional model (Model 1) was statistically significant, $F(6, 127) = 23.41$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .52$, explaining 52% of the variance in brand loyalty. All six emotional predictors made unique and significant contributions.

Hypothesis	Predictor	β	t	p	Supported?
H1	Emotional Attachment	.52	6.84	$< .001$	Yes
H2	Positive Affect	.38	4.67	$< .001$	Yes
H3	Brand Trust	.47	5.93	$< .001$	Yes
H4	Perceived Authenticity → Attachment	.44	5.41	$< .001$	Yes
H5	Gratitude	.31	3.88	$< .001$	Yes
H6	Emotional Brand Experience	.36	4.29	$< .001$	Yes
H7	Digital Engagement (Moderator)	.29	3.51	.001	Yes
H8	Emotional > Functional	$\Delta R^2 = .14$	–	$< .001$	Yes

Table 1. Regression coefficients and hypothesis test results ($n = 134$; DV = Brand Loyalty).

Regarding H7 (digital moderation), the interaction between emotional constructs and digital engagement was significant ($\Delta R^2 = .07$, $p = .001$), confirming that emotional effects on loyalty are amplified by higher levels of social media and influencer interaction. Regarding H8, hierarchical regression showed that the addition of emotional predictors in Step 2 yielded $\Delta R^2 = .14$ ($p < .001$) over and above the variance explained by functional attributes alone (Step 1 $R^2 = .38$), confirming the incremental predictive value of emotional factors.

4.3 Social Media and Brand Engagement Patterns

The most frequently engaged product categories were Fashion/Apparel (73.9%), FMCG (70.1%), and Electronics (69.4%), followed by Beauty & Lifestyle (53.0%) and Digital Services/Apps (23.9%). Brand interaction frequency was moderatetoregular: 41.8% engaged with brands occasionally, 35.8% weekly, and 17.9% daily — suggesting habitual rather than compulsive digital brand engagement. These patterns underscore that emotional loyalty operates across diverse product categories rather than being confined to highinvolvement purchases.



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V. DISCUSSION

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several contributions to the brand loyalty literature. First, it extends Bowlby's (1969) attachment framework into a digital consumer context, demonstrating that the attachmentloyalty pathway holds robustly for Gen Z and that perceived authenticity serves as a gateway to emotional bonding a relationship not previously empirically established in the Indian urban market. The finding that 79.1% of respondents reported their favorite brand aligns with their selfconcept corroborates selfcongruity theory (Sirgy, 1982) and positions brand authenticity as a selfrelevant signal rather than merely an ethical attribute.

Second, the study advances the Affect Infusion Model (Forgas, 1995) by demonstrating its applicability to sustained loyalty formation — not only singlepurchase decisions among digitally native consumers. Positive affect accumulated across multiple brand touchpoints creates an emotional reservoir that buffers against competitive switching, a mechanism less evident in predigital consumer models.

Third, and most distinctively, the empirical establishment of digital emotional engagement as a moderator addresses a critical theoretical gap. Earlier loyalty models treated digital channels as passive distribution contexts; this study repositions them as active emotional amplifiers. For Gen Z, emotional exchanges on social media platforms are not epiphenomenal to brand loyalty — they are constitutive of it. This finding calls for the explicit integration of digital engagement as a structural variable in future loyalty frameworks targeting digitally native cohorts.

Fourth, the demonstration that emotional predictors explain variance in loyalty beyond functional attributes ($\Delta R^2 = .14$) provides empirical weight to Schmitt's (1999) experiential marketing thesis: in markets where functional parity is increasingly common, emotional differentiation becomes the decisive competitive variable.

5.2 Managerial Implications

For brand managers targeting Gen Z, the findings warrant four strategic priorities. First, emotional storytelling should be prioritized over product feature messaging; campaigns that evoke authentic belonging, pride, and shared values outperform those centered on price and performance in building attitudinal loyalty. Second, authenticity must be operationalized across all brand touchpoints packaging, customer service, social media tone because Gen Z consumers are acutely sensitive to inconsistency between brand claims and brand conduct. Third, digital spaces should be designed as emotionally resonant communities rather than broadcast channels; interactive content, usergenerated participation, and responsive social media management sustain the emotional bonds that functional attributes alone cannot. Fourth, loyalty programs should be redesigned around emotional recognition milestones (e.g., shared values, community participation) rather than purely transactional incentives, which resonate less strongly with this cohort.

5.3 Limitations

Several limitations bound the current findings. The crosssectional design precludes causal inference; longitudinal designs are needed to trace how emotional brand bonds form and evolve across the Gen Z lifecycle. The sample, while demographically balanced, is geographically restricted to Bengaluru, limiting generalizability to other urban centers and rural populations. Selfreport measures introduce social desirability and recall biases. The study does not differentiate emotional dynamics by product category, a potentially important source of heterogeneity: emotional attachment may operate differently for highinvolvement electronics purchases than for habitual FMCG choices. Finally, offline brand touchpoints — instore experiences, events, physical packaging — were not measured, leaving the relative contribution of physical versus digital emotional engagement unquantified.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study provides systematic empirical evidence that emotions are central — not peripheral — to brand loyalty formation among Generation Z consumers. Across six emotional constructs, all hypothesized relationships were supported, with emotional attachment and brand trust emerging as the most powerful individual predictors. Digital emotional engagement was confirmed as a moderator that amplifies the emotionloyalty pathway, repositioning social media from a communication tool to a loyaltygenerating mechanism. Perhaps most consequentially for marketing practice, emotional factors explained loyalty variance above and beyond functional attributes, suggesting that the



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traditional emphasis on price and product quality is necessary but insufficient for winning the enduring allegiance of this cohort. As Generation Z moves into peak earning years, brands that invest in emotional intelligence — understanding, evoking, and sustaining authentic emotional connections — will hold a structural competitive advantage. Future research should extend this framework longitudinally, crossculturally, and across product categories to build a more comprehensive emotional model of Gen Z loyalty.

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