

From Bean to Brand: Decoding the Mechanisms of Trust and Engagement in Generation Z's Purchase Decisions

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Xia, K. P., Lee, Y. Y., Kimberley, K. M. L., Kong, M. Y., Khor, S. H., Kong, J. X., ..., & Generation Z consumers in Malaysia (born 1997–2012) with recent Starbucks Decoding the mechanisms of trust and purchase experiences, using a pretested engagement in Generation Z's purchase online survey to collect 101 valid responses from urban centers like Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Johor Bahru. The results reveal that brand awareness enhances customer loyalty and fosters brand trust development. The brand trust serves as a powerful catalyst for brand engagement and customer loyalty, while brand engagement emerges as a crucial driver of both loyalty formation and purchase intentions. Customer loyalty exhibits a positive influence on purchase intention. These findings advance brand relationship theory by demonstrating the sophisticated pathways through which brand awareness influences behavioral outcomes among Generation Z consumers, highlighting the crucial mediating roles of trust and engagement. This research contributes to brand management literature by offering a nuanced understanding of how brand relationships develop among digital-native consumers while providing practical guidance for companies seeking to strengthen customer relationships in increasingly competitive markets.

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on Generation Z consumers in Malaysia, this study investigates the role of brand awareness in shaping customer loyalty and purchase intention for Starbucks. The research method involved a multi-stage sampling procedure targeting Generation Z consumers in Malaysia (born 1997–2012) with recent Starbucks purchase experiences, using a pretested online survey to collect 101 valid responses from urban centers like Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Johor Bahru. The results reveal that brand awareness enhances customer loyalty and fosters brand trust development. The brand trust serves as a powerful catalyst for brand engagement and customer loyalty, while brand engagement emerges as a crucial driver of both loyalty formation and purchase intentions. Customer loyalty exhibits a positive influence on purchase intention. These findings advance brand relationship theory by demonstrating the sophisticated pathways through which brand awareness influences behavioral outcomes among Generation Z consumers, highlighting the crucial mediating roles of trust and engagement. This research contributes to brand management literature by offering a nuanced understanding of how brand relationships develop among digital-native consumers while providing practical guidance for companies seeking to strengthen customer relationships in increasingly competitive markets.

Keywords: Brand Awareness; Brand Engagement; Brand Trust; Customer Loyalty; Purchase Intention

INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of consumer behavior has fundamentally altered the landscape of brand-consumer relationships, particularly in the context of Generation Z. This cohort exhibits markedly different patterns of brand engagement and loyalty formation compared to previous generations, requiring a reassessment of traditional marketing strategies. The shift presents both opportunities and challenges for established brands, especially in emerging markets where conventional consumer behavior models may no longer fully capture the complexity of modern brand relationships. The intersection of generational change and digital transformation creates a unique context for examining how fundamental marketing constructs, such as brand awareness, function in contemporary markets. This study investigates the mechanisms through which brand awareness influences customer loyalty and purchase intention among Malaysian Generation Z consumers. Starbucks in Malaysia serves as the focal brand for analysis, providing an ideal setting to explore these relationships due to its global presence and deep integration within the local market. Malaysia's status as a multicultural emerging economy with a highly digitalized young population further enhances the relevance of this research, offering valuable insights into how international brands can effectively engage Generation Z consumers in similar markets.

A comprehensive theoretical framework underpins this study, integrating multiple perspectives on brand relationship development, including social exchange theory, relationship marketing theory, and institutional theory. This theoretical foundation enables an examination of the complex pathways hypothesized while accounting for the distinct characteristics of Generation Z consumers and the Malaysian market context. The theoretical significance of this study lies in its investigation of the mediating roles of brand trust and brand engagement in the relationship between brand awareness and consumer behavior outcomes. Existing research has established the importance of brand awareness in consumer decision-making (e.g., Fisher & Woolley, 2023; Rahinel et al., 2021); however, the specific mechanisms through which awareness translates into behavioral outcomes remain insufficiently understood, particularly within Generation Z. This knowledge gap becomes even more pronounced in emerging markets, where traditional models of brand relationship development may require substantial modifications to account for local market dynamics and generational preferences (Yu et al., 2022).

This research contributes to the existing literature in several key ways. First, it extends current theoretical frameworks by examining how brand awareness operates through trust and engagement mechanisms to influence behavioral outcomes among Generation Z consumers. This extension is particularly valuable given the limited attention paid to the mediating processes that link brand awareness to concrete behavioral outcomes in emerging markets. Second, the study provides empirical evidence demonstrating the differential effects of brand awareness on various consumer outcomes, challenging traditional assumptions about direct awareness-behavior relationships. Third, it offers insights into how international brands can effectively build relationships with Generation Z consumers in emerging markets, where the interplay between global brand identity and local market dynamics presents unique challenges for brand management.

The structure of this paper is as follows. The theoretical framework and hypotheses are developed through a thorough examination of relevant literature and contextual factors. This is followed by an explanation of the methodology and presentation of results. A detailed discussion of theoretical and practical implications follows, concluding with a synthesis of key insights and recommendations for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives—social exchange theory (SET), relationship marketing theory (RMT), and institutional theory—to elucidate the mechanisms through which brand awareness influences consumer behavior. SET conceptualizes social behavior as an exchange process wherein individuals seek to maximize benefits while minimizing costs (Blau, 2017; Mishra & Mund, 2024). Within brand relationships, this manifests in consumers' calculated engagement with brands based on their expectations of value appropriation. This perspective is particularly relevant to Generation Z consumers, who tend to critically evaluate brand interactions and demand reciprocal value from the brands they engage with.

RMT extends this conceptualization by emphasizing the relational embeddedness of economic transactions, positing that sustained value creation emerges through trust-based, long-term relationships (Ahmed et al., 2019; Möller & Halinen, 2000). Unlike purely transactional interactions, relational exchanges foster deeper brand engagement and loyalty by establishing emotional and psychological connections between consumers and brands. This theory aligns with the growing body of research highlighting the increasing importance of brand trust and emotional engagement in shaping consumer loyalty, particularly among younger generations. In the Malaysian context, RMT offers insights into how Generation Z consumers develop sustained relationships with brands through culturally embedded trust-building mechanisms, such as community-based marketing and localized digital engagement.

Institutional theory provides a macro-level perspective by examining how societal norms, cultural institutions, and regulatory structures shape brand-consumer exchange relationships (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). This perspective is particularly salient in Malaysia, where traditional collectivist values intersect with rapid modernization and digitalization. Institutional influences shape consumer expectations regarding brand behavior, ethical considerations, and marketing communication strategies, making it essential for brands to align their engagement strategies with local cultural norms. In this regard, prior studies have emphasized that consumers in collectivist societies, such as Malaysia, exhibit stronger brand loyalty when brands demonstrate cultural sensitivity and align their messaging with locally relevant narratives. The interplay of institutional forces with evolving digital consumption habits underscores the need for brands to integrate culturally relevant elements into their marketing efforts while maintaining global brand consistency (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015).

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the framework provides a holistic understanding of how brand awareness translates into consumer behavior outcomes. SET highlights the individual utility-based decision-making process, RMT underscores the role of trust and long-term engagement, and institutional theory contextualizes these interactions within broader cultural and societal structures. This multi-theory approach offers a nuanced understanding of consumer-brand relationships, particularly among Generation Z in Malaysia, where digital engagement, trust formation, and cultural alignment collectively shape brand loyalty and purchase intentions.

Generation Z and the Malaysian Market Context

Generation Z represents the first truly digital native cohort, characterized by distinct cognitive architectures and information processing mechanisms that fundamentally differ from previous generations (Pichler et al., 2021). These consumers exhibit heightened sensitivity to authenticity signals (Trang et al., 2024), demonstrate complex multi-platform engagement patterns (Florenthal, 2019), and maintain fluid brand relationships

mediated through digital touchpoints (Ismail et al., 2021). Their decision-making processes reflect a sophisticated integration of online and offline information sources, with particular emphasis on peer validation and social proof (Szymkowiak et al., 2021; Vizcaya-Moreno & Pérez-Cañaveras, 2020).

The Malaysian market context presents a unique institutional environment characterized by three distinct features. First, its multicultural composition—comprising Malay, Chinese, and Indian populations—creates complex cultural dynamics that influence consumer behavior through varied institutional logics (Albury & Ooi, 2017; Noor & Leong, 2013). Second, Malaysia's rapid digital transformation, evidenced by 88% smartphone penetration and extensive social media usage, has created sophisticated digital consumption patterns (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission [MCMC], 2023). Third, the coexistence of traditional and modern retail formats creates institutional duality in consumption practices, particularly relevant for global brands like Starbucks operating within local cultural frameworks (Jin & Kim, 2022).

Brand Awareness and Initial Consumer Response

Brand awareness represents the cognitive accessibility of a brand in consumers' minds and serves as a fundamental antecedent to consumer-brand relationships (Mietra & Wibowo, 2022; Rossiter, 2014). Contemporary conceptualizations extend beyond mere recognition to encompass the richness and accessibility of brand-related mental representations (Bergkvist & Taylor, 2022; Mukaromah et al., 2019). In the context of Generation Z consumers, who navigate an unprecedented volume of brand stimuli, awareness manifests as a complex construct incorporating both traditional recognition metrics and digital touchpoint salience.

The relationship between brand awareness and initial consumer responses operates through multiple theoretical mechanisms. First, enhanced cognitive accessibility reduces decision-making complexity, making familiar brands more likely candidates for consideration and repeat patronage. Second, institutional alignment strengthens behavioral persistence, particularly when brand awareness aligns with cultural values and social norms. Third, awareness creates a foundation for trust development through repeated exposure and cognitive familiarity. Finally, awareness facilitates engagement by providing cognitive schemas through which consumers can interact with the brand across multiple touchpoints. These theoretical mechanisms suggest several initial relationships. When consumers maintain high brand awareness, they are more likely to develop loyalty as reduced cognitive effort and institutional alignment facilitate repeated interactions. Similarly, purchase intentions should increase as awareness reduces perceived risk and aligns with institutional expectations. Trust formation benefits from increased awareness through familiarity and reduced uncertainty. Engagement potential increases as consumers possess richer cognitive schemas for brand interaction. Building on these arguments, we posed:

H1: Customers' brand awareness has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

H2: Customers' brand awareness has a positive effect on their purchase intention.

H3: Customers' brand awareness has a positive effect on their brand trust.

H4: Customers' brand awareness has a positive effect on their brand engagement.

Trust, Engagement, and Behavioral Outcomes

The development of trust and engagement represents a critical intermediate stage in consumer-brand relationships. Trust functions as a fundamental mediating mechanism in relationship marketing theory (Brown et al., 2019; Morgan & Hunt, 1994), while engagement represents active resource investment in brand interactions (Hollebeek & Belk, 2021). Both constructs operate through complex theoretical mechanisms in the

Generation Z context. Trust development influences subsequent consumer behavior through multiple pathways. SET suggests that trust reduces transaction costs (Zhang & Liu, 2021) and perceived risks (Hansen et al., 2018), thereby facilitating relationship continuation (Strupinski & Witek-Hajduk, 2024). Institutional theory indicates that trust alignment with cultural expectations strengthens behavioral persistence (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). For Generation Z consumers, trust operates across both traditional and digital domains, requiring consistency across multiple touchpoints. Trust's influence on engagement stems from reduced perceived exchange risks and increased willingness to invest resources in brand relationships. Engagement, particularly for Generation Z consumers, manifests across multiple platforms and contexts, creating complex feedback loops. High engagement levels indicate resource investment in the relationship, which, according to SET, increases the likelihood of relationship maintenance. Institutional theory suggests that engagement patterns conforming to generational expectations strengthen behavioral intentions. The Malaysian context adds complexity through its institutional duality, requiring brands to facilitate engagement across both traditional and digital platforms. Accordingly, we proposed:

H5: Customers' brand trust has a positive effect on their brand engagement.

H6: Customers' brand trust has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

H7: Customers' brand trust has a positive effect on their purchase intention.

H8: Customers' brand engagement has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

H9: Customers' brand engagement has a positive effect on their purchase intention.

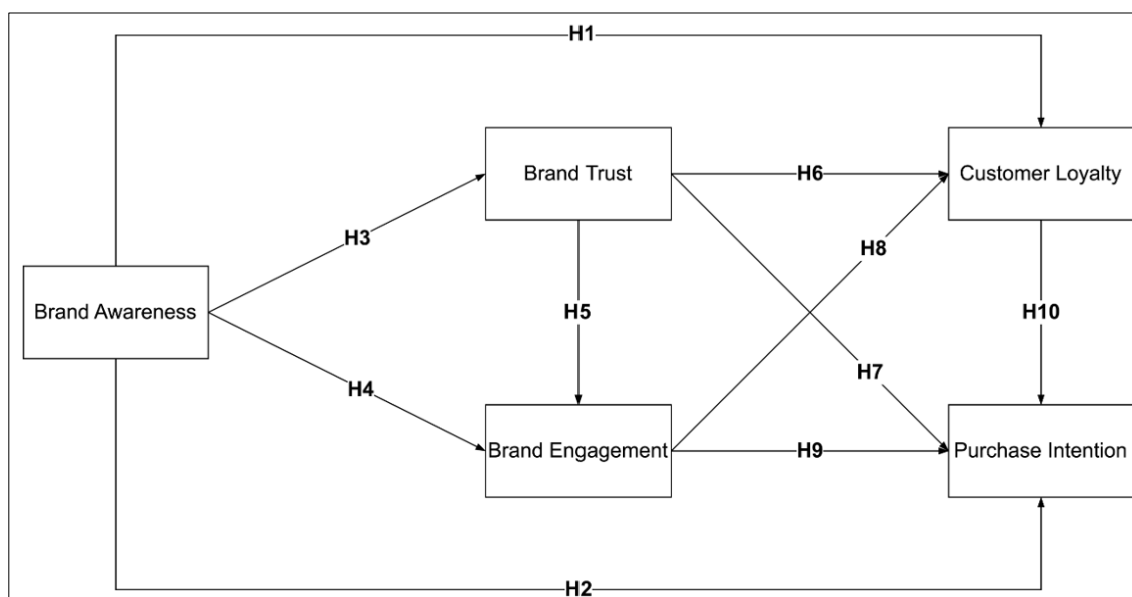
Loyalty-Purchase Intention Dynamics

The relationship between loyalty and purchase intention integrates behavioral learning theory with institutional reinforcement. Loyal customers, having developed stable relationship patterns, face reduced cognitive burden in purchase decisions (Pérez-Morón et al., 2022). Institutional theory suggests that loyalty behaviors aligned with cultural expectations create self-reinforcing patterns (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). In the Generation Z context, loyalty manifests as platform-agnostic commitment, while the Malaysian institutional environment adds cultural complexity to loyalty expression. Therefore, we hypothesized:

H10: Customer loyalty has a positive effect on their purchase intention.

The theoretical framework is presented in Figure 1, which provides a foundation for understanding the complex relationships between brand awareness and consumer behavior outcomes in the context of Generation Z consumers in Malaysia. The framework acknowledges the unique characteristics of this consumer segment while simultaneously accounting for the specific dynamics of the whole Malaysian market context.

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework



RESEARCH METHOD

Sample and Procedure

The empirical investigation drew from a sample of Generation Z consumers in Malaysia. Specifically, we targeted individuals born between 1997 and 2012 who had experienced at least one purchase interaction with Starbucks in the preceding six months. This sampling frame encompassed major urban centers in Malaysia, including Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Johor Bahru, where Starbucks maintains a significant market presence. Following established protocols in consumer behavior research, we employed a multi-stage sampling procedure to ensure representativeness and minimize potential selection bias. Data collection utilized a structured online survey instrument developed through rigorous pretesting with both academic experts and target population representatives. Our final sample comprised 101 valid responses.

Measurements

We employed a four-item scale of [Martins et al. \(2019\)](#) to measure respondents' brand awareness. A sample question is, "Speaking of coffee shops, Starbucks is what I first thought of." To measure brand trust, [Samarah et al.'s \(2022\)](#) scale with three items was used. One sample question is, "Starbucks never disappoints me." [Hollebeek et al.'s \(2014\)](#) three-item scale was utilized to measure brand engagement. Sample questions include "I spend a lot of time visiting Starbucks, compared to other coffee shops." In order to quantify respondents' customer loyalty, a scale of three items was used, adapted from [Yang and Peterson \(2004\)](#). Sample questions involve "I would recommend Starbucks to those who seek my advice about such matters." The scale of [Martins et al. \(2019\)](#) was employed to measure purchase intention. One sample question is, "I find purchasing at Starbucks to be worthwhile." All scales were rated based on five points (one = "strongly disagree," five = "strongly agree").

RESULTS

Demographic Statistics

Table 1. Demographic Statistics

Demographic Information	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		

Male	26	25.74%
Female	75	74.26%
Ethnicity		
Malay	7	6.93%
Chinese	91	90.10%
Indian	3	2.97%

Notes: N = 101. Age is a continuous variable and is therefore not displayed in this table. The mean age is 21.465 years, with a standard deviation of 1.390 years. The minimum (maximum) age is 18 (27) years.

Table 1 shows the demographic composition of our sample. The ethnic distribution comprised predominantly Chinese respondents (90.10%), followed by Malay (6.93%) and Indian (2.97%) participants. The age distribution (Mean = 21.465, SD = 1.390, ranging from 18 to 27 years) captures the core demographic segment of Generation Z consumers in their prime consumption years. The gender distribution showed a notable skew toward female respondents (74.26% female, 25.74% male). This pattern is consistent with previous research on specialty coffee consumption among young urban consumers in Asia-Pacific markets (Wang et al., 2024).

Preliminary Analysis

Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Zero-Order Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1 Brand awareness	0.725				
2 Brand trust	0.419***	0.847			
3 Brand engagement	0.211*	0.714***	0.930		
4 Customer loyalty	0.454***	0.774***	0.674***	0.918	
5 Purchase Intention	0.327***	0.747***	0.723***	0.807***	0.898
Mean	3.990	4.048	4.227	3.965	3.979
SD	0.635	0.624	0.688	0.747	0.726

Notes: N=101; *p < 0.05, ***p < 0.001. The diagonal entries indicate Cronbach's alpha.

We first conducted the preliminary analysis using R. As **Table 2** shows, the results revealed strong internal consistency across all measures, with all Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.725 to 0.930. The correlation matrix revealed patterns that were consistent with our theoretical framework. Brand trust demonstrated strong positive correlations with both customer loyalty ($r = 0.774$, $p < 0.001$) and purchase intention ($r = 0.747$, $p < 0.001$), while brand engagement showed similar strong associations with these outcome variables ($r = 0.674$ and $r = 0.723$ respectively, $p < 0.001$). Brand awareness, our focal independent variable, exhibited moderate positive correlations with brand trust ($r = 0.419$, $p < 0.001$) and customer loyalty ($r = 0.454$, $p < 0.001$), though its relationship with brand engagement was notably weaker ($r = 0.211$, $p < 0.05$). These correlation patterns provide initial support for our theoretical framework while suggesting more complex relationships than initially theorized.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 3. Path Analysis Results

Variables	Brand Trust	Brand Engagement	Customer Loyalty	Purchase Intention
1 Brand awareness	0.783***	-0.245	0.323**	-0.070
2 Brand trust		0.928***	0.445***	0.199
3 Brand engagement			0.210**	0.224**
4 Customer loyalty				0.584***
R-Square	0.176	0.519	0.657	0.722
F-Value	21.074	52.955	61.870	62.338

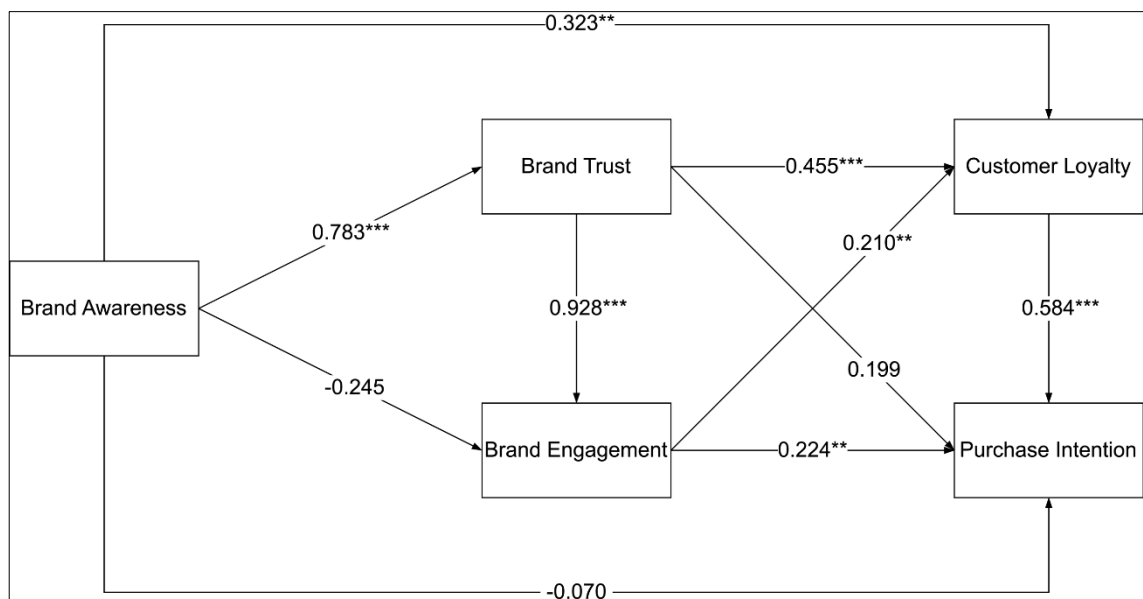
D-W Statistic	2.225	1.868	1.863	2.172
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Notes: N=101; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. Standardized coefficients Beta are reported. Abbreviation: D-W Statistic = Durbin-Watson Statistic.

Path analysis was conducted using R to test the hypothesized relationships among the constructs, with the results presented in Table 3 revealing intricate and multifaceted relationships. The model demonstrated substantial explanatory power, as evidenced by the R^2 values ranging from 0.176 to 0.722, indicating that a significant proportion of variance in the outcome variables was accounted for. Brand awareness was found to have a strong positive effect on brand trust ($\beta = 0.783$, $p < 0.001$) and a moderate positive effect on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.323$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H3 and H1, respectively. However, contrary to expectations, brand awareness did not exhibit significant direct effects on brand engagement ($\beta = -0.245$, $p > 0.05$) or purchase intention ($\beta = -0.070$, $p > 0.05$), leading to the rejection of H4 and H2. Brand trust emerged as a critical predictor, significantly influencing brand engagement ($\beta = 0.928$, $p < 0.001$) and customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.455$, $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting H5 and H6. However, its hypothesized effect on purchase intention was not supported ($\beta = 0.199$, $p > 0.05$), resulting in the rejection of H7. Brand engagement showed significant positive effects on both customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.210$, $p < 0.01$) and purchase intention ($\beta = 0.224$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H8 and H9. Additionally, customer loyalty had a strong positive influence on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.584$, $p < 0.001$), confirming H10. The robustness of the model was further validated by significant F-values across all equations (ranging from 21.074 to 62.338) and Durbin-Watson statistics within acceptable ranges (1.863 to 2.225), indicating appropriate model specification and the absence of autocorrelation. In summary, while H2, H4, and H7 were rejected, the remaining seven hypotheses were supported, highlighting the complex interplay among brand awareness, brand trust, brand engagement, customer loyalty, and purchase intention.

Figure 2 presents our tested framework and path coefficients.

Figure 2. Tested Theoretical Framework with Path Coefficients



DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

The findings offer substantial insights for brand managers and marketing practitioners operating in emerging markets and targeting Generation Z consumers. The results suggest several important practical applications that can enhance brand performance and consumer relationships in these complex market environments. The research demonstrates that brand awareness does not directly translate to purchase intention for Generation Z consumers in Malaysia, carrying significant implications for marketing resource allocation. Brand managers should reconsider traditional awareness-building campaigns that assume direct conversion to sales. Instead, a relationship-focused approach that emphasizes trust-building and engagement activities is recommended. For example, brands might benefit from creating authentic storytelling campaigns that resonate with Malaysian cultural values while using digital platforms preferred by Generation Z consumers. The mediating role of brand trust in the model suggests that companies should prioritize trust-building initiatives in their marketing strategies (Ghosh & Bhattacharya, 2022). For Generation Z consumers in Malaysia, trust develops through consistent brand experiences across both traditional and digital touchpoints. Companies should ensure message consistency across platforms while adapting their communication style to local cultural contexts. This might include incorporating Malaysian cultural elements into brand communications while maintaining global brand standards. For instance, Starbucks could enhance its trust-building efforts by showcasing its commitment to local communities through social media platforms popular among Malaysian Generation Z consumers.

The results indicate that brand engagement converts to loyalty and purchase intention through culturally embedded mechanisms. This finding extends current theoretical models by demonstrating how institutional contexts shape the transformation of engagement into behavioral outcomes. The significant effects found between engagement and behavioral intentions suggest that Generation Z consumers in emerging markets develop brand relationships through complex institutional pathways that combine traditional cultural values with contemporary digital engagement patterns. This research also contributes to the emerging theoretical discourse on generational differences in consumer behavior. The strong effects observed between awareness and purchase intention through loyalty challenge existing theories that characterize Generation Z as purely digital decision-makers (e.g., Szymkowiak et al., 2021). Instead, the findings suggest a more complex theoretical model in which Generation Z consumers in emerging markets develop purchase intentions through relationship-based pathways that mirror traditional relationship marketing frameworks, albeit with contemporary digital expressions.

Additionally, this study refines brand relationship development models in emerging markets. The significant paths from brand awareness to loyalty through trust indicate that emerging market consumers follow relationship development patterns that integrate institutional trust-building mechanisms with contemporary engagement practices. This finding highlights how global brands can build relationships in emerging markets through pathways that respect local institutional logic while accommodating generational preferences for digital engagement, thereby extending current theoretical knowledge. These contributions collectively advance the theoretical understanding of how brand relationships develop in contemporary emerging markets, particularly among Generation Z consumers. The findings underscore the need for more sophisticated theoretical models that can account for the complex interplay between traditional relationship-building mechanisms and contemporary digital engagement patterns in institutionally complex environments.

Practical Implications

The findings offer substantial insights for brand managers and marketing practitioners operating in emerging markets and targeting Generation Z consumers. The results suggest several important practical applications that can enhance brand performance and consumer relationships in these complex market environments. The research demonstrates that brand awareness does not directly translate to purchase intention for Generation Z consumers in Malaysia, carrying significant implications for marketing resource allocation. Brand managers should reconsider traditional awareness-building campaigns that assume direct conversion to sales. Instead, a relationship-focused approach that emphasizes trust-building and engagement activities is recommended. For example, brands might benefit from creating authentic storytelling campaigns that resonate with Malaysian cultural values while using digital platforms preferred by Generation Z consumers.

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Findings on brand engagement's impact on loyalty and purchase intention offer practical guidance for engagement strategy development. Generation Z consumers in Malaysia respond positively to engagement opportunities that blend digital interaction with cultural relevance. Companies should create platform-specific engagement programs that respect local customs while leveraging digital capabilities. This could involve developing mobile apps that incorporate Malaysian cultural elements or creating social media campaigns that celebrate local festivals and traditions while simultaneously maintaining the brand's global identity. The Malaysian market context requires special consideration in practical application. Successful brand relationships in Malaysia develop through a combination of traditional and modern engagement channels. Companies should maintain a presence in traditional retail environments while building sophisticated digital ecosystems. This dual-channel approach should reflect Malaysia's multicultural composition by tailoring marketing materials and engagement initiatives to different cultural groups while maintaining brand consistency.

Generation Z's unique characteristics in Malaysia require specific practical adaptations. These consumers demonstrate sophisticated digital behavior while maintaining strong connections to traditional values. Companies should develop marketing programs that bridge this traditional-modern divide. For example, brands could create digital campaigns that honor family relationships and community connections, values that resonate strongly in Malaysian culture. Social media content should blend global trends with local cultural elements to create authentic connections with Generation Z consumers. The significant relationship between loyalty and purchase intention in the model suggests the importance of loyalty program innovation. Traditional point-based systems may not sufficiently engage Generation Z consumers in Malaysia. Companies should consider developing loyalty programs that incorporate social causes, community involvement, and digital integration. These programs should reward not just purchases but also brand advocacy and community engagement, activities that resonate with Generation Z's values and digital behaviors. Technology deployment strategies should reflect the sophisticated digital behavior of Malaysian Generation Z consumers while respecting

traditional interaction preferences. Companies should develop omnichannel strategies that seamlessly integrate physical and digital touchpoints. Mobile applications should incorporate features that facilitate both individual engagement and community connection, reflecting the collective cultural orientation of Malaysian society.

Practical implications also extend to crisis management and reputation recovery. The strong role of trust in the model indicates that brands should prioritize transparency and authentic communication during challenging times. This becomes particularly important when engaging with Generation Z consumers, who value authenticity and can quickly disseminate information through digital networks. Additionally, employee training and development should align with these findings. Customer-facing staff should understand both traditional Malaysian cultural norms and Generation Z communication preferences. Training programs should develop employees' capabilities to engage effectively across both traditional and digital channels while maintaining cultural sensitivity.

These practical implications extend beyond marketing to influence broader business strategy. Companies should align their organizational structures and processes to support relationship-building with Generation Z consumers in Malaysia. This might involve creating dedicated teams for digital engagement while maintaining traditional relationship management capabilities. Resource allocation should reflect the importance of both traditional and digital relationship-building channels in the Malaysian market context.

CONCLUSION

This research delves into the intricate relationship between brand awareness and consumer behavior among Generation Z consumers within the dynamic landscape of emerging markets, using Starbucks in Malaysia as a compelling case study. By examining this specific context, the study aims to contribute significantly to the existing body of knowledge on brand influence, particularly as it relates to this increasingly important demographic. The findings of this research both challenge and corroborate established theories surrounding brand relationship development, suggesting a more nuanced and complex model of influence than previously theorized. Specifically, the study reveals that the pathway from brand awareness to ultimate behavioral outcomes, such as purchase intention or brand advocacy, is not a simple, direct route. Instead, it operates through a series of sophisticated mediating mechanisms, where brand trust and brand engagement emerge as crucial players in shaping consumer behavior.

The research's rejection of certain hypothesized direct relationships, notably those posited between brand awareness and its immediate impact on behavioral outcomes, casts doubt on the universal applicability of traditional brand influence models. These findings suggest that such models may require substantial modification, particularly when applied to the unique characteristics of Generation Z consumers in emerging markets. This generation, with its distinct values, digital fluency, and evolving consumption patterns, presents a unique challenge and opportunity for brands. The study highlights the importance of understanding these nuances to effectively engage this consumer segment.

The implications of these findings are twofold, impacting both theoretical understanding and practical application. From a theoretical perspective, the research underscores the need for more nuanced and context-specific approaches to conceptualizing and modeling brand relationships, particularly in the context of emerging markets. It calls for a reassessment of traditional brand loyalty models and encourages the development of frameworks that incorporate the mediating roles of brand trust and engagement.

Practically, the findings emphasize the need for marketers to move beyond simplistic brand awareness campaigns and focus on building genuine brand trust and fostering meaningful engagement with Generation Z consumers. This might involve tailored digital strategies, personalized communication, and a focus on creating authentic brand experiences.

Looking ahead, this research opens up several avenues for future inquiry. It is crucial to explore how these brand relationships might vary across different cultural contexts within emerging markets. Malaysia, while representative of some trends, may have specific cultural factors that influence consumer behavior. Replicating this study in other emerging markets with diverse cultural backgrounds would provide valuable comparative insights. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are essential to understanding the dynamic nature of these relationships. Tracking how brand awareness, trust, and engagement evolve over time, especially as Generation Z consumers mature and their purchasing power increases, will be critical for brands seeking long-term success in these markets. Such research would not only deepen our understanding of brand relationship development in contemporary markets but also provide invaluable guidance for practitioners managing international brands in the increasingly important context of emerging markets. By understanding the complexities of brand influence on Generation Z, businesses can develop more effective strategies to build lasting and profitable relationships with this key consumer segment.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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