

Authenticity, Activism and Trust: Understanding the Loyalty of Generation Z Consumers

Farnaz Babaei, Helen O'Sullivan, Chris Chapleo and Martyn Polkinghorne

This briefing paper examines how socio-political issues, shifting generational values and evolving expectations of corporate responsibility shape brand identity and customer loyalty among Generation Z consumers in the United Kingdom (UK). Definitions vary, but Generation Z is generally considered to represent those people who were born between 1997 and 2012 (Wadud *et al.*, 2026). As younger consumers increasingly evaluate brands through ethical, social and political lenses, our research explores how positioning around community, inclusion and sustainability is interpreted, contested and renegotiated by customers. Using a high street coffee shop chain as a case study example, and drawing on qualitative insights, our study highlights the growing complexity of consumer–brand relationships, and the conditions under which loyalty becomes fluid, contingent and dependent on perceived authenticity and trust.

For this study, a qualitative interpretive methodology was adopted to explore how Generation Z consumers construct meaning around brand identity and socio-political positioning. Eight semi-structured interviews were undertaken that enabled participants to describe their experiences in their own terms, revealing how service encounters, digital engagement, ethical concerns and socio-political issues shape their perceptions of authenticity, trust and loyalty. This approach prioritised depth over generalisability, thereby allowing the research to capture the nuanced and context-specific ways in which consumers negotiate values, emotions and brand behaviour. Recursive abstraction was undertaken to identify patterns within the data collected (Polkinghorne and Taylor, 2021) that indicate the dynamic and contingent nature of contemporary consumer–brand relationships. Ethical approval for this research project was obtained from Bournemouth University (ID: 67159; approval date: 22 Oct 2025).

The data collected revealed that Generation Z's loyalty is far more dynamic and conditional than traditional brand-equity models might otherwise imply. Rather than responding consistently to marketing or service quality, consumers reported continually reassessing their relationship with the brand through ethical expectations, digital interpretations and personal values. Their loyalty therefore has become contingent on perceived authenticity and trust, with emotional attachment offering stability but not guaranteeing continued engagement. These outcomes highlight a shift in how younger consumers evaluate global brands as they are no longer fixed identities, but instead they have become evolving actors whose credibility must be demonstrated through consistent behaviour, and meaningful alignment, with the values they claim to represent.

The findings invite deeper reflection on what loyalty means in an era in which brands operate within social, political and digital scrutiny. Generation Z's relationship with the case study company illustrates that trust and authenticity are not static assets, but may instead be ongoing negotiations shaped by experience, culture and constant visibility. Conditional loyalty challenges assumptions about how commitment is earned, revealing a dynamic interplay between organisational claims, lived behaviour and consumer interpretation. In this context, loyalty becomes less a stable end-state and more a fragile, and continually reconstructed, relationship that must be earned repeatedly through credible action, coherent values and consistent experience.

Theme 1: Service as an Emotional Anchor. Service experiences formed the foundation of participants' relationship with the case study company. Familiarity, comfort and predictable interactions created emotional attachment that often-outweighed concerns about price or socio-political issues. High-quality service acted as a stabilising force, helping to sustain loyalty even when consumers questioned aspects of the case study company's wider behaviour and/or public positioning.

Theme 2: Digital Engagement and Co-created Brand Meaning. Digital engagement shaped both convenience and interpretation. The case study company's app and rewards system reinforced habit, personalisation and emotional attachment, while their social media exposed consumers to competing narratives about the brand. Digital platforms were therefore seen to strengthened loyalty, but they also amplified scrutiny, thereby enabling consumers to co-create brand meaning beyond the case study company's formal communications.

Theme 3: Social Awareness, Authenticity and Trust. Participants varied widely in their awareness of the case study company's socio-political actions. Where activism was recognised, authenticity became central, i.e. consumers responded positively when values appeared consistent with organisational behaviour, but scepticism grew when actions seemed promotional or performative. Trust emerged as being dynamic and continually renegotiated through ethical claims, everyday experiences and digital information.

Theme 4: Brand Perception, Contradiction and Conditional Loyalty. Brand perception was shaped by the interplay of service, digital engagement, ethical expectations and socio-political positioning. Loyalty was not fixed, but instead conditional, depending on perceived alignment between the case study company's stated values and its actions. Emotional attachment offered resilience, yet contradictions between claims and behaviour weakened trust and prompted reconsideration.

Theme 5: Brand Alternatives and Switching Behaviour. Participants frequently moved between the case study company and its competitors for ethical, practical and experiential reasons. Switching did not always indicate rejection as consumers reported retaining emotional attachment while choosing alternatives based on price, convenience and/or socio-political concerns. This behaviour demonstrates examples of conditional loyalty where continued engagement depends on ongoing alignment with personal values and expectations.

References
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