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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TIKTOK MARKETING COMPARED TO INSTAGRAM IN ATTRACTING GENERATION Z

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Abstract. The study will compare and contrast the ability of the two platforms to market to consumers in generation Z. This paper uses a combination of industry data, peer-reviewed empirical studies and advertising performance metrics published from 2023 to 2026 to assess the performance of both platforms across five areas: user demographics/reach, algorithmic content distribution, organic and paid engagement, the effectiveness of influencer marketing, and downstream audience-inspired purchase behavior. These results show that although Instagram has a larger overall Gen Z user base, with adoption rates around 86-89 percent versus TikTok's 63-82 percent, TikTok consistently performs better than Instagram when it comes to engagement metrics, with organic engagement rates ranging from 2.5 to 8.1 percent, well ahead of Instagram's averages. Other benefits include the reduced advertising expense, the higher level of brand discovery for organic content among Gen Z, and the greater impact on purchase intent as a result of TikTok user engagement, with 77 percent of Gen Z users saying they discovered a product on TikTok. The analysis highlights key constraints, however, such as inconsistencies in measurement, regulatory uncertainty of TikTok in some regions, and potential risks of content fatigue. The paper concludes that a strategy to use both platforms is a good combination of tools, with TikTok being more powerful for awareness and discovery tasks, and Instagram complementing the platform for conversion and nurturing tasks.

Keywords: TikTok marketing; Instagram marketing; Generation Z; social media engagement; influencer marketing; short-form video; brand discovery; consumer behavior

Introduction

A Pew Research Center analysis in late 2024 found that a significant new behavior among Gen Z users is discarding traditional search engines for social media to find information online, as 46 percent of Gen Z respondents reported that they prefer to do so [1]. This discovery wasn't just a fleeting moment; it was a transformation of the digital information economy we are in, where TikTok and Instagram have become the primary battlegrounds where brands are vying for the attention, trust and buying power of the most digitally native generation ever. Gen Z's own purchasing power is expected to grow larger than that of other generations, and the impact of their indirect spending power will reach trillions of dollars as they influence household spending. Given that Gen Z's purchasing power is expected to become larger than other generations, and their indirect spending influence will continue to grow in trillions of dollars, the question of which platform is more effective at marketing becomes strategically and commercially important.

Comparing Tik Tok and Instagram is usually considered a direct competition between two short video video platforms, but this is not exactly the case. Instagram, acquired by Facebook in 2012 and now a part of Meta, is an old, multi-format platform featuring photo feeds, Stories, Reels, direct messaging, and a robust, well-integrated advertising platform. The younger, single format platform, TikTok was launched internationally by ByteDance in 2017, and its differentiating factor is that it has a discovery focused recommendation algorithm compared to maintaining social graphs [2]. Even with its larger user base among Gen Z users, recent industry data shows that TikTok has higher engagement, better organic reach and greater influence on younger users' purchase decisions [3, 4]. Such different performance attributes bring up key questions of resource allocation between the two platforms on the marketer's part.

In this paper, we will conduct a systematic comparison of the effectiveness of TikTok and Instagram as marketing tools for Generation Z. In the center of this thesis presented here lies the fact that TikTok can be measurably more effective than Instagram in achieving awareness, discovery, and engagement goals with Gen Z audiences, and Instagram has complementary strengths in conversion, social commerce, and building brand communities over the longer-term. In support of this thesis, quantitative information from industry reports, demographic surveys, and advertising performance benchmarks is compiled, and empirical (peer-reviewed) studies, which examine consumer behavior for both platforms, are conducted. The analysis is sorted by the five comparative dimensions: platform demographics, platform reach, mechanisms of algorithmic content distribution, engagement metrics, and effectiveness of influencer marketing, as well as the impact it has on purchasing decisions. Finally, counterarguments and limitations are discussed and implications for marketing strategy and future research directions are provided.

Background and Context

Defining Generation Z and Its Digital Identity

Born between 1997 and 2012, this generation is commonly referred to as Generation Z, the first generation to live in a world where there is no meaningful experience outside of a networked digital environment [5]. It has resulted in unique consumption habits, such as Gen Z's insatiable appetite for visual and video content, declining tolerance of interruptive ads, and increased expectation of peer and influencer messages over institutional brand messaging [6, 7]. The 2025 Sprout Social Index also shows that the platforms Gen Z prefers to engage with are all competitive, with 89 percent using Instagram, 84 percent using YouTube, and 82 percent using TikTok, revealing the extent of Gen Z's social media habits and how the top platforms are stacked against each other [8].

Gen Z's digital identity also includes a convergence between social media and commerce—behaviors. According to Kadence International, 75% of the global Gen Z population consults social media to guide their purchasing decisions, while 61% have actually made a direct purchase as a result of a social media ad. In 2024, 68 percent of Gen Z consumers found new products on social media, up from 60 percent in 2023, and about 60 percent of those who found a product actually purchased an item [9]. These stats also make it clear that social media

isn't just a brand awareness tool for Gen Z, but rather a part of the discovery-to-conversion funnel, making its platform selection impactful in terms of measurable revenue.

The Rise of TikTok and the Evolution of Instagram

TikTok has seen a massive expansion internationally since 2018, which is unprecedented in social media. The platform currently (2026) has about 1.99 billion monthly active users, with the biggest age group being those aged 25 to 34 (40.3 per cent), followed by the age group of 18 to 24, which overlaps directly with older Gen Z (25.8 per cent). According to SOAX research, 36.2 per cent of TikTok's global user base are aged 18 to 24, a further 33.9 per cent are aged 25 to 34, making the total of people under 35 around 70 per cent of TikTok's user base [10]. This imbalance is strategically significant given that it fits neatly with the generation that is having the greatest impact on current consumption patterns.

TikTok has had an impact on the evolution of Instagram. Instagram started as a photo-sharing platform, but launched Reels in August 2020 to compete directly with TikTok's short-form video platform. Even though Instagram is getting older, it still has a significant audience of Gen Z and young Millennials with 27.6 percent and 34 percent, respectively, of the platform's users as of April 2026, according to data from Statista [11]. Instagram's audience has also seen a decline, with Hootsuite reporting a 9 percent drop among Gen Zers, which could be due to the audience's shift to TikTok and other new platforms [12]. This slight drop indicates that Instagram is facing competition, and that it's crucial to understand how to benchmark with the other platform accurately.

Methods

Scope and Methodological Approach

This study uses comparative synthesis approach with three types of source materials. First, industry statistics from trusted research agencies like Pew Research Center, Statista, Sprout Social and Hootsuite are provided to baseline demographic and behavioural trends. Secondly, empirical research findings published in peer-reviewed journals (ScienceDirect and PubMed Central) offer theoretically informed understanding of how short-form videos affect consumer behavior [5, 12, 13]. Third, marketing analytics companies such as Gupta Media, Business of Apps, and The Influencer Marketing Factory provide quantitative reporting on metrics like cost-per-mille, cost-per-click, and engagement, which allows for direct cross-platform comparisons [3, 14, 15]. The aim of this triangulated approach is to overcome the weaknesses of each individual source and to generate findings that are both grounded in the empirical and action-oriented.

This analysis is limited with respect to several boundaries. The study is focused primarily during the period of 2023 to 2026, as this covers the most up-to-date information and the platforms are continually evolving. The geographic focus is primarily on the United States and English language overseas markets as the availability and regulatory regime for TikTok is likely to differ markedly depending on the jurisdiction. Rather than analyzing individual features of TikTok/Instagram like Reels or Stories, the analysis looks at the platform as a whole, and these sub-formats are mentioned where relevant. Lastly, the study focuses on the three key modalities that brands are using on these platforms with Gen Z – organic content marketing, paid advertising and influencer marketing – while other new modalities like social commerce and live shopping are still in their infancy.

Results and Discussion

Comparative Analysis of Platform Effectiveness

Platform Demographics and Gen Z Reach

The first aspect of comparison is the size and makeup of the Gen Z audience a platform serves. Instagram still has a lead in overall use of the platform by Gen Z. But Pew Research Center data shared with Alternacx shows that around 80 percent of Gen Zers are using Instagram, whereas 63 percent are using TikTok [16]. The 2025 Sprout Social Index shows even higher numbers, with 86-89 per cent of all Gen Z social media users being active on Instagram, making it the social utility that young people are most likely to use by default. According to

EssayHub, 77 percent of Gen Zers use TikTok to discover products, in-line with Instagram, which is used by 74 percent, especially in fashion and beauty categories [17]. These numbers suggest that although Instagram's absolute number of Gen Z users is larger than some think, it is smaller than it was, and the gap is getting smaller.

Although TikTok may not have nearly as many Gen Z users, its user base is more compact in terms of the age brackets it reaches, with some of the youngest Gen Zers found in the most lucrative age brackets. As per SOAX, around 70 percent of TikTok user base is below 35 years of age, with 36.2 percent aged between 18 to 24 and 33.9 percent between 25 to 34 years [10]. Shopify notes that 23.5 percent of adult TikTok users are in the 18 to 24 age group, while 41.6 percent are in the 25 to 34 age group, which is an obvious youth bias for the platform [18]. Instagram's audience, on the other hand, is slightly older, with 33.3 percent of users between the ages of 25 and 34, and a significant section of older users as well [11]. While Instagram boasts more overall Gen Z users, TikTok's focus on the 18-24 age group is a strategic benefit for marketers whose products are targeting the front-of-the-pack Gen Z consumers.

A time spent on-platform can also be considered an important gauge of relative reach quality. According to a University of Mississippi honors thesis examining brand marketing on TikTok, U.S. users spend an average of 68 minutes each day on the app, and engagement is much higher than usual with the app's content-first algorithm. The usage of social media among the Gen Z population increased by 7.7 percent in 2024, compared to a 1.8 percent growth in the United States population overall [13]. Cropink adds that half of Gen Z's social platform usage is at least four hours a day. It's challenging to find similar daily usage figures for Instagram because of how Meta reports on its daily data, but the tendency for TikTok to be used more during long extended sessions indicates that it is able to grab more attention – a necessary step toward successful brand exposure and message take-up.

Algorithmic Architecture and Content Distribution

The biggest structural gap between TikTok and Instagram is the content distribution algorithms they have, which dictate the reach of branded content. Unlike the "social graph" that allows for recommendations from existing social networks, TikTok's For You Page algorithm primarily relies on content interactions like views, views to completion, shares, and comments to generate recommendations [19, 20]. The architecture is such that a brand or creator that does not have any followers can go viral when the content aligns with the engagement signals of the algorithm. The Digital Marketing Institute reports that TikTok's algorithm processes a mix of content by creators the user follows and content from creators they don't – allowing new profiles to gain traction in a way that is hard to do on follower-graph platforms [19].

Instagram's algorithm, on the other hand, has always been focused on the social graph, prioritizing content from accounts that a user is already following and content that the algorithm recommends to the user in the Explore tab and more recently, in the Reels tab. Although Reels might look like TikTok videos, their algorithmic logic is different, as Instagram is more likely to boost main accounts that post regularly and have a longer history, whereas TikTok favors individual video performance, regardless of the account's history [21]. TikTok has more flexibility regarding video length, with the platform being okay with any content format under 60 seconds, whereas V9 Digital claims that the ideal time for a video to remain on the screen is 15 to 30 seconds [22]. These architectural differences mean that for brand marketers, TikTok's organic discovery is better for new brands and content, whereas Instagram will require a higher level of investment in audience growth over time before it becomes significant.

The marketing takeaway from TikTok's content-graph algorithm is that the app works as much like a discovery service as a social network. According to Statista, 41 percent of TikTok users have turned to the platform as a search engine in 2024, and the platform is the most important social platform for information-seeking behaviour in the generation [1]. For instance, 25% of Gen Z consumers report that TikTok is effective at providing information, while 12% of Gen X consumers report the same, and 17% of Millennials report the same [23]. Similarly, Shopify reports that 65 percent of Gen Z's are using TikTok as a social search tool instead of as a

discovery platform [24]. TikTok has also recognized the behavior shift, and TikTok's advertising blog calls TikTok a brand discovery destination "where swipe, tap, and search all play a role in research and purchase decisions" [19].

Engagement Metrics and Comparative Effectiveness

Engagement rate is the most well-known KPI for comparing the effectiveness of marketing on social media platforms, as it measures the number of interactions gained as a percentage of the number of impressions or followers. In terms of this metric, TikTok always beats Instagram on almost all measurement methods. According to the data in the TikTok 2026 survey, engagement rate for TikTok is between 7.4 percent and 8.1 percent, significantly higher than other platforms [3]. Meanwhile, smaller creators on TikTok have engagement rates as high as 7.5 percent, which is more than two times higher than the similar rates on Instagram, according to Sprinklr [4]. According to HubSpot, TikTok has an engagement rate of around 5.75 percent, while Facebook Reels has an engagement rate of about 2 percent, making TikTok the top platform in terms of engagement [25].

Other sources state that TikTok engagement rates are still high, but not as high as previously. As of 2024, Influencergiftform stated that its average TikTok engagement rate is around 2.5 percent, and the industry average is 1.5 percent, per Hootsuite, with some difference depending on the industry sector [23]. According to Phlanx's TikTok Engagement Calculator, the engagement of users with follower counts between 1,000 and 5,000 is 5.6 percent, while accounts with followers ranging from 5,000 to 20,000 have an engagement rate of 2.43 percent, and larger accounts see their engagement rates drop over time [3]. TikTok influencers with 1000-5000 followers have an incredible 15.04 percent engagement rate, reflecting the significant influence that micro influencers have on the platform [3]. The engagement rate on TikTok rose by 49 per cent year over year from 2024 to 2025, with more mature platforms seeing engagement rates flat or fall year over year, according to Sprout Social.

Instagram engagement rates are lower than TikTok's, but still significant and are different for every type of media. According to Socialinsider, Gen Z accounts for 26.5 percent of all Instagram users as of January 2025, and TikTok has engaged with users more than Instagram in all measures of engagement, especially in short-form videos [26]. But there are some types of content that Instagram still has its advantages. Instagram is particularly effective for discovering fashion and beauty products, with its visual-first nature and curated aesthetic still holding true to its roots [17]. Although Instagram's overall engagement rates could be on the lower side, when it comes to conversion, 39 percent of Gen Z have bought something after seeing an Instagram ad, reports Slateteams, showing that there are certain categories where Instagram excels at making a sale. This suggests that engagement rate is a good comparative tool but should not be used as a standalone effectiveness measure and should be considered together with downstream conversions.

Influencer Marketing Efficacy

The two platforms now have very different economies but also have a key difference in the way that they influence Gen Z: influencer marketing has become a key part of the marketing mix on both platforms. According to Digital Marketing Institute, roughly 66 percent of brands are leveraging TikTok in their influencer marketing programs, making the app an essential part of modern-day influencer marketing tactics [27]. According to Advertising Week, 88 percent of advertisers find TikTok marketing campaigns effective and 54 percent have raised their budgets for marketing on TikTok [28]. The high adoption and satisfaction rates stand testament to the architecture of TikTok, which allows influencers and brands they promote to be discoverable organically, as their content appears on the For You Page algorithm, which pushes content into users' feeds beyond their own followers' reach.

The business opportunity of TikTok marketing is also unique. Brands are increasingly drawn to "creators" who produce high-quality content, engagement, and authenticity over number of followers, which now ranks fourth on the list of selection criteria [29]. This prioritization is in favour of the micro-influencer ecosystem on TikTok where there are high engagement rates and perceived authenticity, which have a disproportionate commercial impact. TikTok's content marketing and engagement patterns impact the purchase intentions of TikTok users compared

to older social platforms in a way that is structurally different from Gen Z as seen from case-studies and qualitative analysis in the ResearchGate publication analyzing Gen Z as a driving force in influencer marketing [30]. Content marketing and customer engagement are also shown to impact the buying behaviour of Gen Z, with a separate study from ResearchGate, titled "TikTok Made Me Buy It", indicating that content marketing positively influences purchase decisions via entertainment, providing information value, and parasocial interaction [30].

Although Instagram's influencer marketing system is more established and mature, it's done differently. Brands can gain a lot from influencers on social media, whether they are celebrities or large-scale influencers, but the algorithm of the platform is known for its focus on reach in the established accounts [7]. In 2024, 69 percent of Gen Z consumers found new products or brands via influencers, up from 45 percent in 2023, showing the influencer-driven discovery trend is rapidly gaining popularity on platforms, says Sitecore [16]. This discovery is split, however, between TikTok and Instagram. According to EssayHub, 77 percent of Gen Z discover new products on TikTok, while 74 percent discover them on Instagram, and TikTok has a slight edge in the discovery stage of the buying process [17]. This indicates that brand marketers can leverage TikTok influencers for top-of-the-funnel (TOFU) awareness and discovery campaigns, and Instagram influencers for mid-funnel (MOFU) consideration and lower-funnel (BOFU) conversion campaigns.

Advertising ROI and Cost Efficiency

Paid advertising performance is a key benchmark as a comparison to the direct cost of engaging Gen Z audiences with specific brand messaging. TikTok ads typically cost less per Mille as compared to Instagram ads. Business of Apps reports that TikTok's average CPM ranges from \$3.20 to \$10, with an average engagement rate of 2.65 percent and an average CPC ranging from \$0.25 to \$4 [14]. According to Gupta Media, as of January 2025, TikTok ads CPM shoots at \$4.20 with an average cost per link click of \$0.74 and an average link click through rate of 0.57 percent [15]. In fact, according to Stackmatix, CPMs on TikTok in Tier 2 and Tier 3 markets often dip into the sub-\$1.00 range, offering plenty of room to create return on investment opportunities for brands who aren't afraid to try to reach audiences from places they couldn't get to before [14].

Instagram ads cost more because it's a more mature platform, and a big part of that is also due to its inclusion in the Meta advertising auction system. According to Gupta Media, the average CPM for Instagram ads reached \$8.16 as of June 2025, almost double the comparable CPM figure on TikTok, and costs per link click were higher than the CPL ads on TikTok [31]. Hootsuite also states that the CPM on Instagram is \$15.26, the CPC is \$1.31 and the cost per engagement is \$0.067 [32]. According to Quimby Digital, Instagram CPMs are about 10–15 percent higher year over year, which suggests that there is a structural upward pressure on advertising costs on Instagram [31]. WordStream highlights that there's considerable variation in CPM at \$2 to \$6 dollars for cost-effective campaigns, a range that isn't even surprising when considering the difference between lower and higher quality creatives, or targeting specific or general campaigns. When it comes to Instagram CPM, there is a wide range to consider—\$2 to \$6 dollars for cost-effective campaigns, according to WordStream—and there's not really much of a shock in that range when you consider targeting specific campaigns or general ones, or creatives that are high-quality or not.

The cost difference also needs to be assessed in terms of engagement and conversion results. With the CPM being lower and engagement higher, it seems that brands are consistently getting better economics for their brand awareness campaigns on TikTok, with Quimby Digital explicitly stating that brands on TikTok enjoy economics that are significantly lower in CPM and CPC than other platforms, ranging from \$1-\$4 CPM and \$0.10-\$0.30 CPC, which depends on the niche and engagement of the campaign [14]. But Instagram's increased CPMs are tempered by the fact that the platform has better direct-response capabilities, including when it comes to social commerce. What's clear, though, is that 39 percent of Gen Z has made purchases after seeing Instagram ads, raising the possibility that Instagram's higher advertising costs are warranted by its superior lower-funnel conversion performance [33]. So, it is assumed that placing a campaign on a particular platform should depend on the goal of

the campaign, with TikTok being more cost-efficient for awareness and engagement campaigns, and Instagram more effective for direct response and conversion campaigns.

3.6 Impact on Purchase Behavior and Brand Discovery

Finally, the best way to measure the effectiveness of the marketing is to see how it affects purchasing behavior, and in this area TikTok excels. In 2024, 68% of Gen Z consumers found new products they were interested in on social media, an increase of 6% from 2023; nearly 60% of who found products went on to place an order [9]. In 2024, 69 percent of Gen Z consumers found new products or brands through influencers, a significant rise from 45 percent in 2023, showing how social platforms are increasingly playing a role in the initial steps of their buying process [16]. For the generation, TikTok is the most prominent social discovery channel: EssayHub states that 77 percent of Gen Z use TikTok to find new products [17].

The academic literature indicates that TikTok affects purchase behavior in several different ways. In a recent 2024 study published in the Journal of Business Research and cited 149 times, Meng et al. show that the content characteristics of short videos differently influence the consumer purchasing behaviors, where the informational, entertainment value, and source credibility each contribute to purchase intention [12]. A 2025 research article published by Luo and colleagues on PubMed Central and cited 115 times, confirms that short-form video content is useful, easy to use and entertaining, all of which have a profound impact on consumer trust and subsequent purchase decisions [13]. Authentic brand-consumer interactions are a major strength of TikTok, as revealed in the University of Mississippi thesis [34] on the analysis of brand marketing on the platform that is targeted to Gen Z consumers.

The effect of Instagram on purchase behaviour is significant but it works slightly differently, and is grounded in Instagram's storied background of visual curation. According to the study on the effectiveness of Instagram visual campaigns to increase the awareness of the brand among Gen Z, the effects of brand awareness on the Instagram platform are especially highly related to visual campaign coherence and aesthetic quality [7]. According to Mintel, it is platforms like TikTok or Instagram that are frequently the initial step in the shopping process for Gen Z consumers, as almost one in every ten Gen Z Germans starts their product research by using social media platforms [35]. According to Slateteams, Instagram continues to be a major force in social commerce, as 39 percent of Gen Z has purchased after being exposed to Instagram ads, which helps the platform become a more significant driver of visual inspiration leading to purchases [33]. The results indicate that these two platforms complement each other in the purchase funnel, with TikTok working primarily as a discovery and awareness platform, and Instagram primarily as a consideration and conversion platform.

The behavioral evidence adds to this complementary interpretation. Kadence indicates that 75 percent of Gen Z consumers globally engage in social media purchases, and 61 percent have made a purchase as a result of a social media ad [6] but doesn't provide data about purchases by platform. Based on the ResearchGate study on Gen Z purchase behavior and social media, the expansion of social media has introduced a range of marketing opportunities that are more effective with customized marketing than with a single, generic approach [36]. Indeed, Sprout Social found that 43 percent of Gen Z say they're more likely to purchase a product they've seen on social media, while the average across all populations is trending downward — meaning that it's not only about the platforms, it's also about the generation. [37] The takeaway for marketers is that you can't pick either an integrated platform strategy or an either-or approach; one will likely yield better results.

Counterarguments and Limitations

Measurement Inconsistencies and Methodological Concerns

One of the main challenges in this comparative analysis, as well as other works on the effectiveness of platforms, is the varying methodology used to measure each platform. The above figures for engagement rate vary from source to source, depending on the size of the follower population, industry, and the method used to calculate it [3, 23]. By comparison, the average is about 1.5 percent for TikTok, which is significantly lower than the 5.75 percent from HubSpot or between 7.4 and 8.1 percent from The Influencer Marketing Factory [3, 23, 25]. These differences are not due to data error, but due to methodological pluralism, which makes

it difficult to make a direct comparison between platforms. Additionally, engagement, impression and view classifications used to report on the platform can also differ, so reported figures must be considered as indicative rather than definitive. There is currently no uniform cross-platform measurement approach, which future studies should tackle.

Regulatory Uncertainty and Platform Risk

It's illegal to judge the effectiveness of TikTok without taking into account the platform's significant geopolitical and regulatory risk. In 2024, the United States passed laws compelling ByteDance to sell its operations in the United States, and similar bans and/or restrictions have been proposed in India, the European Union and other jurisdictions. The uncertainty about these regulations can pose structural risks to brands focusing their marketing efforts on TikTok, with the possibility of sudden changes in platform availability or access to audiences. The Wery analysis of Gen Z content preferences mentions that there is enough research to suggest that Gen Z is not as loyal as their content is consumed elsewhere, which might result in a healthier algorithm [26]. Instagram, on the other hand, has the benefit of the regulatory certainty of its parent company, publicly listed in the United States and subject to defined regulations. While TikTok's engagement rates may be a strong selling point for its fast-paced, trend-driven content, Instagram's more controlled environment is a strategic consideration that's appealing to risk-averse marketers, especially those in regulated sectors or focused on building long-term brand equity.

Content Fatigue and Authenticity Concerns

Both platforms are grappling with the issue of content saturation and audience fatigue – but in different ways. Trending content can also lead to homogenization pressure, as TikTok's algorithm prioritizes it, which may result in an erosion of brand differentiation as more content from creators ends up looking like brand content. Dang and colleagues (2025) found that brands could leverage the participation of 'trends' in their short-form ads for greater reach but might also risk losing their distinctiveness if not done carefully, after an analysis of the topic in the Marketing Management Journal, which cited the study four times [38]. Aesthetic fatigue is another challenge Instagram is faced with because of the aestheticized nature of its visual legacy, creating what some researchers call an inauthenticity tax; that is, too beautiful content is being punished by too raw an audience. Instagram usage among Gen Z has hit a dip of 9 percent year over year, according to CTAM, which could be due to the platform's aesthetic norms and the shift to other platforms [12]. The challenges imply that effectiveness is as much about platform choice as it is about content strategy, taking into account the specific norms of each platform.

Generalizability and Sample Limitations

There are some limitations to the generalizability of the findings reported in this paper, related to the sample. The first is that much of the data referenced in the industry comes from a sample of the U.S. or English-language literate population, and may not reflect the generalizability of Gen Z populations in other cultures or countries. An online social media use study published in PubMed Central in 2024 and referenced 101 times, found that the most favorite social media platforms among Gen Z were YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok and Instagram, but the sample of the study is from a specific country context which may not be representative of the global context [5]. Second, the research articles referenced are often based on convenience samples of university student populations, and may not reflect the entire Gen Z generation, especially the younger age group (13-17) whose social media habits may differ from those of young adults. Third, both platforms are evolving rapidly, and papers published over a twelve-month period may become outdated. Thirdly, both platforms are evolving quickly, which may render some results from a couple of years ago irrelevant to academic research, which takes a longer period for publication. The restrictions here indicate that the findings of this paper should be considered as tentative and subject to changes as further empirical data becomes available.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

The study has explored the effectiveness of TikTok and Instagram in marketing to Gen Z in five areas: platform demographics and reach, algorithmic content distribution, engagement metrics, influencer marketing results, and impact on purchase behaviors. When analyzed together, and their merits compared to the other platforms, the evidence presented in this brief points to a complex conclusion that recognises the relative advantages of each platform. Instagram continues to have a bigger share of Gen Z users, around 86 to 89 percent of users, and is still performing better than any other platform when it comes to visual brand building and direct response conversion. Although a bit fewer Gen Zers are using TikTok in absolute numbers, it consistently performs better than Instagram on engagement metrics, ranging from 2.5 to 8.1 percent, and has lower advertising costs, with CPMs being about half of those on Instagram, as well as better influence on Gen Z product discovery, with 77 percent of the demographic reporting they found products on TikTok.

With a content-graph as its system, rather than a social-graph that is the structural backbone of Instagram, the algorithmic architecture of TikTok becomes a fundamental of its effectiveness advantages. The design allows for organic discovery by brands and creators who don't have a massive following, helps make the site a search engine for 41 percent of users, and explains why micro-influencers can get so much engagement. Instagram's algorithm, on the other hand, prioritizes brands with an engaged audience and regular posting, and this makes it harder for new brands to enter the market but works in favor of those that are willing to commit to the platform in the long run. This is to say that the decision of platform should be based on campaign goal, brand familiarity, and the particular Gen Z segment being addressed, not based on a blanket determination of which platform is superior, in general.

Strategic Implications for Marketers

The results of this analysis have some important implications for marketing strategy. First, brands aimed at Gen Z need to take a holistic approach and not just focus on one platform, as TikTok and Instagram complement each other during the Gen Z purchase journey. The algorithmic pluses and lower CPMs make TikTok an ideal platform for upper-funnel goals like brand awareness, product discovery, and influencer reach. Instagram, on the other hand, is more appropriate for mid and lower funnel consideration and lower funnel conversion goals, as it's built on a foundation of visual curation and social commerce features that make it more effective in driving direct responses. The allocation of resources should be based on these complementary strengths, not as alternatives.

Second, according to Forbes Advisor, brands should redirect their influencers budget towards micro-influencer partnerships because the value measured by content quality, engagement rate, and authenticity outweighs the number of followers. Second, Forbes Advisor reports that brands should reallocate their influencers budgets to micro-influencer partnerships, especially on TikTok, where micro-influencers can reach up to 15 percent engagement rates. Third, 41% of users search TikTok—which means brands should use hashtags, keyword-heavy descriptions, and join into search-trend-related content as well as optimize content for traditional search engines. Fourth, the regulatory uncertainty in a number of markets indicates that brands should keep diversifying their platforms to prevent the abrupt loss of access to their audiences, especially for brands whose longer-term commitment is to TikTok brand communities.

Implications for Future Research

Analysis points to a number of directions for future research that would further the body of evidence for comparisons of platforms. One way to overcome this limitation is to follow the same cohort of Gen Z over successive years, as is possible using a longitudinal study which allows for analysis of platform preference and effectiveness over time as the cohort ages. Second, experimental research which randomly tests brand campaigns on TikTok versus Instagram, with both brand campaigns matched in their creative and targeting, can give causal evidence on relative effectiveness, which is not possible from an observational study. Thirdly, a study comparing the effectiveness of content strategies across different platforms (e.g.,

trend-jacking on TikTok vs. aesthetic curation on Instagram) would reveal content-strategy contingencies that affect the effectiveness of platforms. Fourth, cross-cultural comparative studies of the behaviour of Gen Z in markets other than English would overcome the geographical scope of the current evidence base.

Fifth, and most importantly, it is important to have studies comparing the brand equity long-term impact of TikTok marketing versus Instagram marketing. While the focus on engagement and conversion rates is prevalent in the current evidence base, the real question that needs to be addressed is whether the brand discovery process on TikTok leads to long-lasting brand loyalty or short-term purchase decisions. Likewise, the study would shed insights into the algorithmic content distribution consequences on brand safety, such as the risks of brand adjacency to harmful or brand-incongruent content, which would assist marketers in assessing the brand reputational risk with the benefits provided by TikTok's algorithmic features. The two platforms keep growing, and continued research into these issues will be necessary to ensure that there will be a body of evidence available to inform marketing practice in this dynamic environment.

Concluding Remarks

This comparative study reveals that TikTok has significantly greater marketing effectiveness in engaging Generation Z audiences on the metrics of engagement, organic discovery, advertising cost-effectiveness, and upper funnel purchase influence when compared to Instagram. This does not necessarily imply that a platform is better, however. Instagram has a lot to offer in terms of absolute reach, conversion, regulatory strength, and visual brand-building — it is critical to any integrated marketing plan for Gen Z. For today's marketers, a multichannel platform strategy that uses TikTok to support awareness and discovery campaigns, and Instagram to support consideration and conversion campaigns, with resources optimized based on campaign goals, target audience, and brand stage is likely the best strategy. While Generation Z is continuing its ascent to being the brand's most commercially significant generation, this next generation will increasingly be defined by who can leverage the unique strengths of each platform to cultivate long-term customer relationships.

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