



CRACKING THE CODE: WHAT MUMBAI'S GEN Z SHARES AND WHY

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Abstract

This study investigated what makes social media trends go viral among Mumbai's Generation Z, a highly influential but hard-to-please audience. For brands, engaging this group is high-risk, as attempts can be seen as either "real" or "fake." The researchers' goal was to create a clear guide for brands to connect authentically. We discovered two key findings: First, hyperlocal content is critical. Using Mumbai-specific references such as local slang, inside jokes about commuting, or familiar landmarks, that makes Gen Z significantly more likely to share content. Second, this group doesn't really care if a brand started the trend or just joined in later. What matters is how the brand participates; they value authenticity, creativity, and whether the brand adds value (like being funny or useful) far more than the trend's origin. In conclusion, this paper provides a practical framework showing marketers that building genuine connections means prioritizing a real understanding of local culture over simply chasing the next trend.

Key Words: Genz, Generational Cohort Analysis, Five sources model.

Introduction

India's Generation Z is a massive group that is fundamentally changing how people in the country shop and Mumbai is the main hub where new digital trends are born and spread. Since this generation grew up online, their values and buying habits are all deeply tied to social media. This creates a big challenge for marketers, they must build real connections with a group that demands authenticity above all else, yet the trends they follow can disappear almost overnight.

This paper digs deep to understand why things go viral with Mumbai's Gen Z. Our goal is to give brands a clear, simple guide on how to connect with them in a smart and genuine way. We have three main objectives: first, to find the biggest trends by looking at popular content like memes, challenges, and viral audio. Second, to analyze the "why" behind their popularity, focusing on key factors like local Mumbai humor, cultural relevance, and what this group feels is authentic. Finally, we will use these findings to create a "best practices" guide to help brands build a truly meaningful connection.

Literature Review

This research delves into the multifaceted landscape of viral social media trends among Mumbai's Generation Z, a digitally native and economically significant cohort whose distinct consumer decision-making styles, as highlighted by **Thangavel, Pathak and Chandra (2019)** in "Consumer Decision-making Style of Gen Z: A Generational Cohort Analysis," necessitate tailored engagement strategies emphasizing digital information reliance and a demand for authenticity. We acknowledge the complex interplay between social media and Gen Z's financial well-being, particularly the potential for "Aspirational Spending and Financial Strain" as revealed by **Kamraju (2024)** in "Chasing Dreams on Credit," which identified how social media exposure fuels aspirational spending and increased credit reliance among Indian Gen Z, underscoring ethical considerations for brands promoting certain lifestyles. Our study employs the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), drawing from foundational findings by **Whiting and Williams (2013)** in "Why people use social media: a uses and gratifications approach," who identified ten core gratifications for social media use including social interaction, entertainment, and information seeking. This is further extended by **YAMAN and ÇAKIN (2021)** in "Investigation of the relationship between influencers and Generation Z in the context of Uses and Gratifications Theory," who specifically applied UGT to influencers, explaining how they fulfill Gen Z's needs for information, entertainment, and social connection. Furthermore, to understand authentic brand engagement within these trends, we utilize the Five Sources Model proposed by **Davis, Piven and Breazeale (2014)** in "Conceptualizing the brand in social media community: The five sources model," which articulates that brand consumption in social media extends beyond functional benefits to encompass emotional, self-oriented, social, and relational drivers.

Research Methodology

This study investigated viral social media trends among Mumbai's Gen Z using a mixed-methods research design for a comprehensive analysis. A review of the secondary research revealed a significant gap in studies specifically focused on Generation Z in Mumbai. The objective selected for the paper are: 1. Identify and Profile Dominant Social Media Trends. 2. Analyze Drivers of Engagement and Cultural Resonance. 3. To Develop Actionable Guidelines for Brand Engagement.

Research Design

A mixed-methods design was adopted, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. This pragmatic choice allowed for the collection of quantifiable data on patterns and relationships, while also capturing the nuanced cultural resonance and authenticity perceptions, providing a robust framework to address research objectives.

Research Setting and Population

The researcher had conducted this research with a focus on Mumbai, India, specifically targeting the Generation Z demographic (16-25 years old). Mumbai was chosen as a critical hub for digital trend generation, and Gen Z as the core demographic due to their intrinsic link to social media and influence on consumer behavior. The sample size for the research was 50 individuals.

Data Collection Instruments

Primary data was collected via a structured, multiple-choice online questionnaire. This instrument gathered specific, quantifiable data on social media usage, content preferences, engagement drivers, and perceptions of brand authenticity. Google Forms served as the platform for efficient deployment and data collection.

Sampling Strategy and Data Collection

The researcher used a random sampling method to gather a representative group of Gen Z respondents in Mumbai. The survey link was distributed through popular instant messaging networks, ensuring we reached the correct demographic based on age and location.

Data Analysis

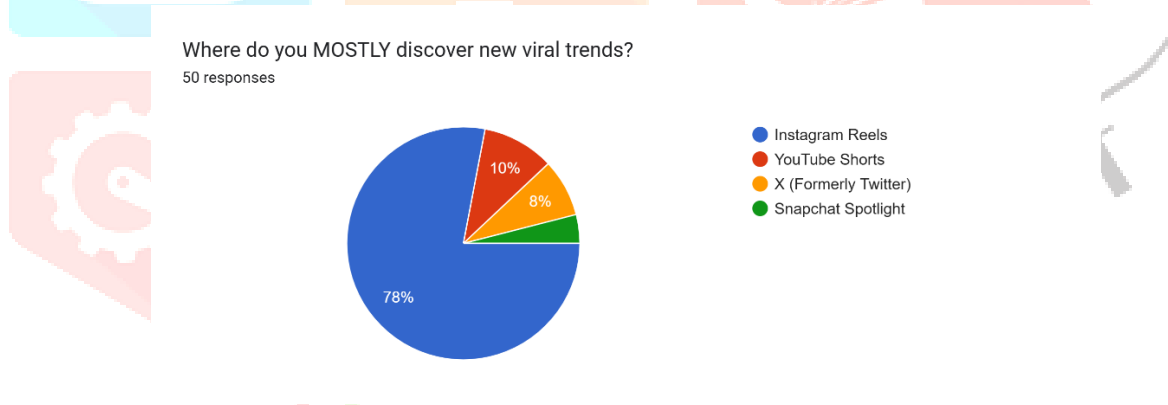
Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics summarized key findings (frequencies, percentages). For hypothesis testing, Chi-Square (X^2) analysis was employed. This allowed for the examination of associations between categorical variables, specifically testing hypotheses regarding the influence of hyperlocal content and the relationship between trend drivers and brand strategy, providing objective, data-driven insights.

Data Interpretation

The primary data, collected from 50 valid survey responses from Gen Z individuals based in Mumbai, was analyzed to interpret their social media behaviors, content preferences, and perceptions of brand engagement. The findings directly address the stated research objectives and provide quantitative support for the proposed hypotheses.

Objective 1: Identify and Profile Dominant Social Media Trends

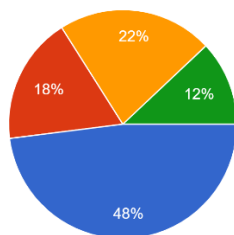
The data clearly profiles the dominant platforms and content formats among Mumbai's Gen Z. Instagram Reels emerged as the leading platform for discovering new viral trends, cited by 78% of respondents, while YouTube Shorts and TikTok alternatives followed at notably lower percentages.



In terms of content formats, “Comedy Skits & Memes” (48%) and “Relatable ‘POV’ or ‘Slice-of-Life’ Videos” (22%) were identified as the most popular. This finding is consistent with prior literature emphasizing Gen Z’s strong inclination toward short-form, visual-first, and humor-driven content that allows for quick consumption and social sharing. The predominance of comedic and relatable content reflects this generation’s preference for authenticity, immediacy, and emotional connection over polished or overtly promotional media.

In the last month, what type of viral content have you seen the most?

50 responses



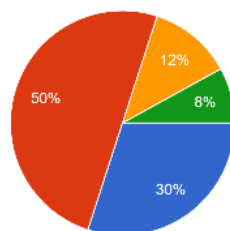
- Comedy Skits & Memes
- Dance or Lip-sync Challenges
- Relatable "POV" or "Slice-of-Life" Videos
- Informative Clips (e.g., finance, news, life hacks)

Objective 2: Analyze Drivers of Engagement and Cultural Resonance

To identify the key drivers of engagement, respondents were asked to indicate what makes a trend go viral or resonate with them personally. The leading factor was "The content is super relatable and feels true to life" (50%), followed by "The humor is hilarious and original" (30%). These findings quantitatively support the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory, which posits that individuals engage with media to satisfy specific needs such as entertainment, social connection, and self-expression.

What is the #1 reason a trend catches your attention?

50 responses



- The humor is hilarious and original
- The content is super relatable and feels true to life
- The song or audio is extremely catchy
- It's visually aesthetic or looks really cool

Objective 3: To Develop Actionable Guidelines for Brand Engagement:

Hypothesis Testing

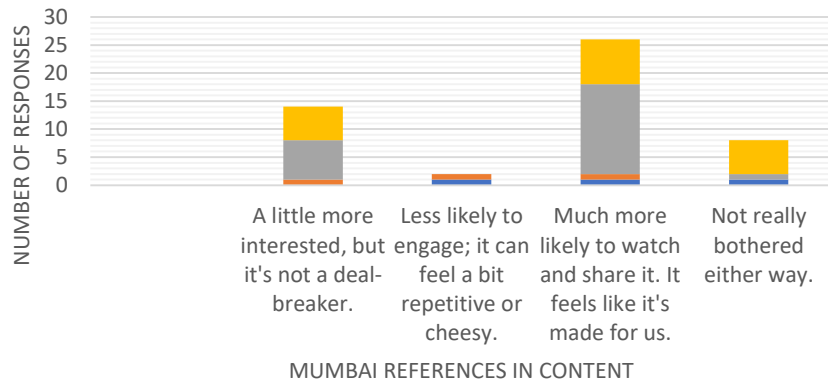
Hypothesis 1: The Impact of Hyperlocal Content

Null Hypothesis (H₀): There is no association between whether content includes Mumbai-specific references and the likelihood of watching and sharing it.

Alternative Hypothesis (H₁): There is an association between whether content includes Mumbai-specific references and the likelihood of watching and sharing it.

The Chi-Square test yielded a χ^2 value of 23.12 with a p-value of 0.006. Since the p-value is below the significance threshold ($\alpha = 0.05$), we reject the null hypothesis. This confirms a statistically significant relationship between the inclusion of Mumbai-specific references and increased engagement likelihood among Gen Z respondents.

Hypothesis 1: Mumbai References vs. Sharing Tendency



Observed Frequency				
	"I need to post this before everyone else does."	"I want to see what my friends think about this."	"This is hilarious, my friends have to see this."	"This is so me/us, it's a perfect inside joke."
A little more interested, but it's not a deal-breaker.	0	1	7	6
Less likely to engage; it can feel a bit repetitive or cheesy.	1	1	0	0
Much more likely to watch and share it. It feels like it's made for us.	1	1	16	8
Not really bothered either way.	1	0	1	6
Expected Frequency				
	I need to post this before everyone else does.	I want to see what my friends think about this.	This is hilarious, my friends have to see this.	This is so me/us, it's a perfect inside joke.
A little more interested, but it's not a deal-breaker.	0.84	0.84	6.72	5.6
Less likely to engage; it can feel a bit repetitive or cheesy.	0.12	0.12	0.96	0.8
Much more likely to watch and share it. It feels like it's made for us.	1.56	1.56	12.48	10.4
Not really bothered either way.	0.48	0.48	3.84	3.2

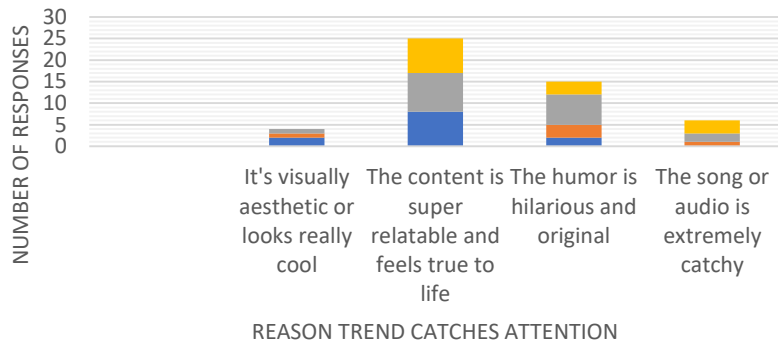
Hypothesis 2: Brand Strategy and Trend Drivers

Null Hypothesis (H₀): The reasons a trend catches attention and the strategies brands use to leverage it are unrelated.

Alternative Hypothesis (H₁): The reasons a trend catches attention and the strategies brands use to leverage it are related.

The Chi-Square test yielded a χ^2 value of 12.29 with a p-value of 0.197. Since the p-value exceeds the significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), we fail to reject the null hypothesis. This indicates that there is no statistically significant relationship between the initial reason a trend becomes popular and the specific brand strategies used for successful participation.

Hypothesis 2: Trend Catching Attention vs. Brand Success



Observed Frequency				
	Added their own funny or creative twist to it.	Collaborated with a creator who is actually popular.	Made sure the trend perfectly matched their brand's identity.	Used the trend very quickly, while it was still new.
It's visually aesthetic or looks really cool	2	1	1	0
The content is super relatable and feels true to life	8	0	9	8
The humor is hilarious and original	2	3	7	3
The song or audio is extremely catchy	0	1	2	3
Expected Frequency				
	Added their own funny or creative twist to it.	Collaborated with a creator who is actually popular.	Made sure the trend perfectly matched their brand's identity.	Used the trend very quickly, while it was still new.
It's visually aesthetic or looks really cool	0.96	0.4	1.52	1.12
The content is super relatable and feels true to life	6	2.5	9.5	7
The humor is hilarious and original	3.6	1.5	5.7	4.2
The song or audio is extremely catchy	1.44	0.6	2.28	1.68

Key Findings

This research deconstructed the mechanics of virality among Mumbai's Generation Z, providing insights into their social media consumption, engagement drivers, and perceptions of authenticity. The key findings, directly addressing the research objectives, are:

Dominant Platforms and Content Formats: The study identifies Instagram Reels as the primary platform for trend discovery among Mumbai's Gen Z, driven by its short-form video format. Within this, hyperlocal memes and relatable storytelling emerged as the most resonant and engaging content formats. These preferences highlight Gen Z's demand for concise, shareable, and authentic content that provides entertainment and facilitates self-expression.

The Preeminence of Hyperlocal Relevance: Hypothesis 1 was strongly supported ($p < 0.05$), demonstrating a statistically significant association between Mumbai-specific references in social media content and an increased likelihood of sharing. This finding is pivotal, confirming that content imbued with local slang, landmarks, or shared cultural experiences profoundly enhances its resonance and virality. Hyperlocal humor and cultural relevance are critical drivers of engagement, fostering identity and driving participatory sharing.

Authenticity of Execution Outweighs Trend Origin: Hypothesis 2 found no significant statistical link between the initial driver of a trend's popularity (organic vs. brand-initiated) and the specific strategy a brand uses to successfully participate ($p > 0.05$). This crucial insight indicates that Mumbai's Gen Z is discerning about how a brand engages, not who originated the trend. Perceived authenticity, creative execution, and contextual appropriateness are paramount, with value-adding participation being key to success.

Demand for Relatability and Shared Identity: Beyond specific formats, findings consistently indicated a strong preference for content that resonates personally, reflecting everyday experiences and fostering shared identity. This aligns with Thangavel, Pathak and Chandra (2019) observations on Gen Z's value-driven decisions and their demand for authenticity, and with the "self-oriented" and "social" drivers of brand consumption by Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014).

Conclusion

This research successfully explored viral social media trends among Mumbai's Generation Z, fulfilling its objectives by identifying dominant trends, analyzing their cultural resonance, and formulating actionable guidelines for brand engagement.

The study established Instagram Reels as the primary platform for trend discovery, with short-form video content, particularly hyperlocal memes and relatable storytelling, being the most resonant formats. This highlights Gen Z's demand for concise, authentic, and participatory content.

A key contribution is the empirical validation of hyperlocal relevance as a paramount driver of virality. The statistically significant association between Mumbai-specific references and increased sharing likelihood demonstrates that genuine cultural immersion is essential for deep engagement within this urban context.

Crucially, the research found that authenticity of execution in brand participation is more critical than a trend's initial origin. There was no statistical link between a trend's driver (organic vs. brand-initiated) and perceived brand success. This underscores that Gen Z values genuine, creative, and value-adding involvement over mere opportunistic trend-following, with perceived authenticity being the ultimate arbiter of success.

In summary, for brands to meaningfully connect with Mumbai's Gen Z, strategies must embrace deep hyperlocalism, prioritize relatable short-form video content, focus on genuine and creative execution, and foster community and co-creation.

While providing valuable insights, future research could expand the sample size, include qualitative components, and conduct comparative studies across different regions to further refine these findings. Ultimately, this study offers a strategic compass for brands navigating the authenticity-driven social media landscape of Mumbai's Gen Z.

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