



Keeping It Real: How 'Real People' Versus Models Influence Gen Z's Trust and Purchase Decisions Online

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Abstract: With the increasing dominance of social media in brand communication, visual representation has become a critical factor in shaping the consumer perceptions, particularly among Generation Z (Gen Z). This research examines the responses of Gen Z to the brand advertisements, which showcase real people versus professional models, focusing on aspects such as trust, relatability, emotional response, and purchase intention. An exploratory research design was used to gather primary data through a structured online questionnaire administered to 61 Gen Z respondents from Indian and international backgrounds. Descriptive statistical analysis was done with percentages and visual representations to unveil the key patterns in consumer responses.

The results show that ads with real people are usually perceived as more reliable, relatable, and authentic than those with models. These perceptions were found to have a positive impact on brand consideration and purchase intention. On the other hand, ads with professional models were more strongly linked with aspirational appeal but were less effective in establishing credibility and thus, driving purchase-related behavior. Moreover, the study reveals that factors like brand trust and positive past experiences have a more significant impact on purchase decisions than advertising alone.

As an exploratory research with a limited sample size, the findings are only indicative. However, the study helps to understand the rising importance of authenticity-led representation as a means of engaging the Gen Z consumers and provides practical implications for brands aiming at gaining trust and creating meaningful connections in digital environments.

Keywords - Generation Z (Gen Z), Authenticity in Advertising, Real People vs Professional Models, Brand Trust, Relatability, Emotional Response, Purchase Intention, Digital Brand Communication

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms' exponential growth has changed the way brands communicate with their target groups, especially youth audiences like Gen Z. Unlike previous generations, they have grown up in a digitally saturated environment where visual content dominates daily interaction, making advertising representation a critical factor in how brands are perceived. The use of Instagram, YouTube, and short-form video applications has greatly increased the exposure of people to branded content, which has also made trust, authenticity, and relatability more important than before in determining the consumer's response.

Given the change to a digital world of communication, brands have to make a strategic decision about how to represent people in their commercials. On one hand traditional advertising has for long depended on professional models and flawless images to generate aspiration and desirability, but on the other hand, modern brand communication is using more and more "real people" who are described as everyday individuals in

natural and relatable contexts to convey the message. This shift is particularly visible in campaigns targeting Gen Z, a group often characterized by its skepticism towards overtly polished marketing and its preference for content perceived as genuine and transparent.

Trust is a major issue that has been raised in online brand communication. Because of the flood of sponsored content, influencer marketing, and algorithm-driven advertisements, Gen Z consumers are now more doubtful of brand intentions and authenticity. Therefore, the impression of a brand as credible, relatable, or manipulative can be strongly influenced by the brand's portrayal of individuals in advertising. Representation thus is not just for the sake of beauty; it has a significant influence on the emotional responses, brand evaluation, and purchase consideration that follow.

While the industry shows an increasing interest in authenticity-led marketing, there is still very little empirical evidence that looks into the direct effects of ads with real people versus those with professional models, especially in the context of Gen Z. Most of the existing research has been more general in terms of advertising effectiveness or has concentrated on celebrity endorsements, thereby leaving the question of how different kinds of visual representation affect the trust, emotional connection, and purchase intention of this particular demographic, unanswered.

This research is aimed at filling this void by studying Gen Z consumers' responses to brand advertisements of real people against those with professional models. By examining trust, relatability, emotional response, and willingness to consider or choose a brand, the study aims to uncover the role of representation in shaping Gen Z interaction with brands online. The results from this exploratory research are meant to be used as an academic resource and also to offer practical solutions to marketers looking to gain trust and establish meaningful connections with Gen Z audiences in digital environments.

II. OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this research is to find out the influence of various types of visual representation in online brand advertising on Gen Z perception, emotions, and behavioral intentions. This study intends to comprehend the different responses of real people advertisements to those of models, resulting from the increasing implementation of authenticity-led marketing strategies.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine and compare Gen Z's level of trust toward brand advertisements featuring real people versus those featuring professional models.
2. To assess how relatable Gen Z consumers find advertisements that use real people in comparison to model-based advertising.
3. To analyze the influence of representation style (real people versus professional models) on Gen Z's willingness to consider or choose a brand.
4. To explore the emotional responses associated with real-people advertisements and model-led advertisements, particularly feelings such as authenticity, aspiration, and connection.
5. To evaluate whether the type of representation used in online brand communication affects purchase intention and brand preference among Gen Z consumers.

These objectives guide the overall research design and provide a structured framework for analyzing Gen Z's attitudes toward authenticity, trust, and representation in contemporary digital advertising.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the crucial elements for Gen Z is the visual side of a brand and as a result of their online behavior, this has become the determining factor in which they judge brands. Because this group uses platforms like Instagram for most of their day, the way people are presented in ads has a great influence on their views of trust and believability. Studies on representation reveal that advertising not only displays people but also creates new concepts, thus the influence is big on how people see things like authenticity, identity, and intention, regardless if the ad is with regular people or professional models (Hall, 1997).

By employing "real people" brands utilize authenticity signs that closely resemble everyday life, thus increasing relatability and emotional closeness. A study shows that consumers respond more to content that is based on real human experience, thus they become more likely to see the message as sincere and trustworthy (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

The research on authenticity goes on to say that when ads mirror the real world rather than giving an idealized version, consumers will see less psychological distance between themselves and the brand, hence their attention and positive evaluation will both increase (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010).

Simultaneously, the research on model-based and aspirational advertising indicates that using professional models can result in a strong desirability effect but at the same time, it may cause a distance effect by showing overly perfect images that are hardly relatable and therefore, can reduce relatability even though the ads may be successful in getting attention. Research that compares the use of celebrities or models versus that of ordinary people for endorsing a product shows that the non-celebrity or the ordinary portrayal tend to have more credibility and be more sincere especially when the consumer is looking for trust and realism rather than aspiration (Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011).

Trust is a major factor that influences consumer evaluations, and marketing pioneer work shows that brand trust is a direct driver of brand loyalty and purchase-related results through a series of emotional and cognitive changes (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

One of the emotional responses to the brand such as the feeling of authenticity, being a part of something or admiration can on top of this also be the means through which the advertisement's persuasive power is increased; content that is of high arousal or emotionally resonate will result in message retention, sharing, and behavioral change, thus real-people ads versus model-led ads emotional tone can influence these outcomes to a significant extent e.g., purchase interest (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999).

Purchase intention is largely understood within behavioral theory as a conscious likelihood or willingness of a consumer to buy, which is influenced by attitudes, perceived norms, and perceived identity relevance of the product (Ajzen, 1991).

Empirical research also shows that purchase intention increases when consumers see more value, trust, and personal relevance in a brand thus linking cognitive evaluation directly to buying willingness (Dodds, Monroe, & Grewal, 1991).

Taken together, existing literature suggests that representation style, whether a brand chooses real people or professional models can influence Gen Z's trust, emotional reaction and eventual purchase intention through the pathways of authenticity, relatability, perceived credibility and identity alignment. But previous experiments hardly have focused on Gen Z specifically and also barely have done a direct controlled comparison of these two representational approaches which means that there is a distinct gap as well as a need for investigating how this demographic assesses trust, relatability, emotional connection, and likelihood of purchase when exposed to real-people as opposed to model-based advertising.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed an exploratory research design to find out how Gen Z views brand advertisements with real people versus those with professional models. As the study aimed to find out the patterns, perceptions, and relationships rather than test the hypotheses, an exploratory approach was chosen. This design is appropriate given the limited existing research that directly compares these two representation styles specifically within a Gen Z context.

Target Population and Sample

The study was targeted at the Gen Z consumers, the cohort was broadly defined as people born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s. The survey respondents were from both India and the rest of the world, thus the

findings represent the views of the Gen Z worldwide in terms of digital advertising. In total, 61 valid responses were recorded and analyzed.

The sample was drawn through convenience sampling as the survey was opened to Gen Z respondents who were easily accessible and contacted via the internet. Although the sample size hampers the possibility of generalization, it is enough for the exploratory analysis and trend spotting.

Data Collection Method

Primary data was gathered through a structured online questionnaire developed and shared via Google Forms. This method was selected because of its effectiveness, accessibility, and suitability for digitally active Gen Z respondents. The questionnaire was mostly composed of closed-ended questions, such as multiple-choice and Likert-scale items, aimed at capturing respondents' perceptions of trust, relatability, emotional response, and purchase intention resulting from different advertising representations.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire was designed into sections focusing on:

- People's general attitudes toward online brand advertising
- Perceptions of advertisements featuring real people
- Perceptions of advertisements featuring professional models
- Trust, emotional response, and purchase intention related to both representation styles

The questions were framed in simple and neutral language to minimize response bias and ensure clarity.

Data Analysis Technique

The data collected was analyzed in Microsoft Excel. To summarize the answers, descriptive statistical tools like percentages and frequency distributions were used. Visual aids such as bar and pie charts were used to present the data in an easy way and to facilitate the interpretation. The analysis is geared towards finding comparative trends between real-people and model-based advertising without, however, implying the existence of causal relationships.

Variables of the Study

This research looks at the impact of different forms of representation in online brand advertising on Gen Z's perceptions and behavioral intentions. The variables are clearly defined and operationalized to be in line with the research goals and survey design.

Independent Variable

In this research, the independent variable is the type of advertising representation. It indicates the way the individuals are presented in the brand ads and is split into two categories:

- **Real people**, defined as everyday, non-professional individuals depicted in natural, relatable, and realistic contexts.
- **Professional models**, defined as trained individuals presented in polished, idealized, or aspirational formats commonly used in traditional advertising.

This variable serves as the primary factor influencing respondents' perceptions and responses.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables represent Gen Z's attitudinal, emotional, and behavioral responses to different advertising representations. These include:

- **Trust**, which refers to the extent to which respondents perceive brand advertisements as credible, honest, and reliable.
- **Relatability**, defined as the degree to which respondents feel personally connected to or reflected in the advertisement.
- **Emotional response**, encompassing feelings such as authenticity, aspiration, and emotional connection evoked by the advertisement.
- **Purchase intention**, which reflects respondents' willingness to consider, try, or choose a brand after exposure to the advertisement.

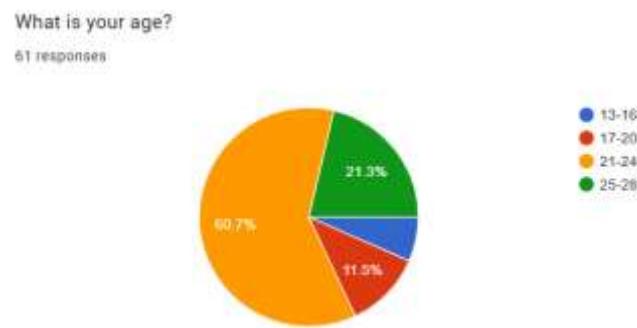
Ethical Considerations

Respondents were informed that their responses would be kept **confidential** and used **solely for academic research purposes**. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and no personally identifiable information was collected.

V. DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis focuses on understanding exposure to advertising formats, perceptions of trust and relatability, emotional responses, and the influence of representation style on purchase intention.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

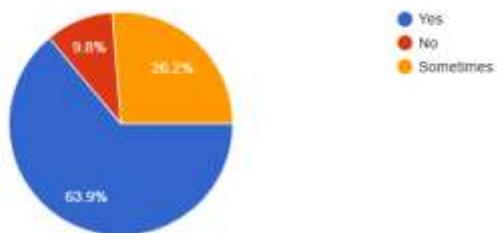


The age distribution of respondents shows that the majority of participants fall within the **21–24 age group (60.7%)**, followed by respondents aged **25–28 (21.3%)**. Smaller proportions belong to the **17–20 (11.5%)** and **13–16 (approximately 6.5%)** age categories. This confirms that the sample is strongly representative of **young Gen Z adults**, a segment that is highly active on social media platforms and frequently exposed to online brand advertising.

Engagement with Brands on Social Media

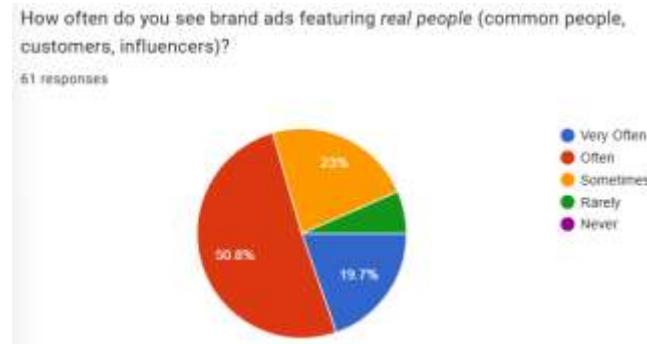
Do you follow brands on Instagram or other social media platforms?

61 responses



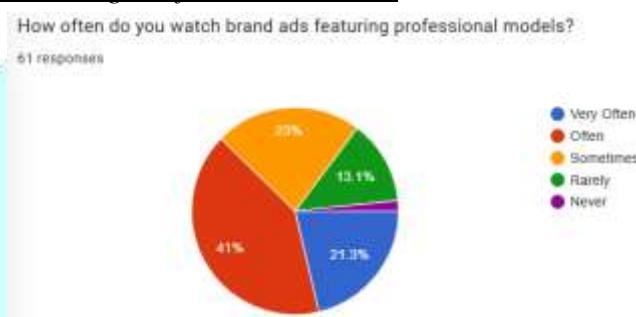
A significant proportion of respondents (**63.9%**) reported that they actively follow brands on Instagram or other social media platforms, while **26.2%** indicated that they do so occasionally. Only **9.8%** stated that they do not follow brands at all. This highlights the relevance of social media as a key brand touchpoint for Gen Z and supports the suitability of this medium for studying advertising perception and influence.

Exposure to Advertisements Featuring Real People



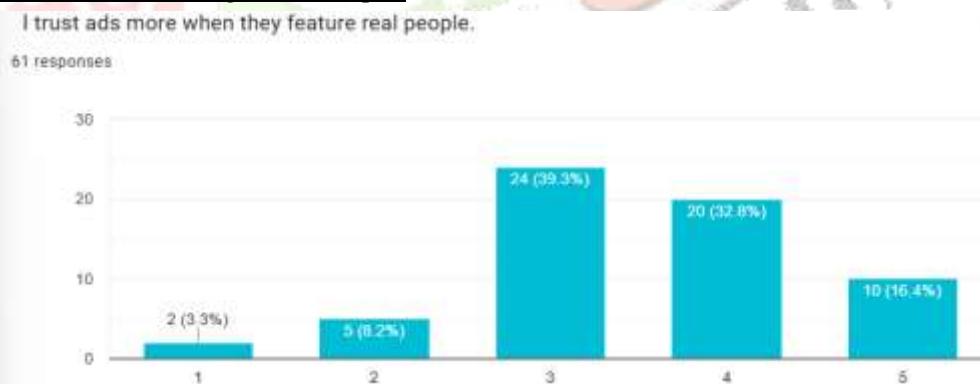
More than half of the respondents (**50.8%**) reported that they *often* see brand advertisements featuring real people, while **19.7%** encounter such ads *very often*. An additional **23%** reported seeing them *sometimes*. This indicates that real-people representation has become a common and visible advertising approach within Gen Z's digital environment.

Exposure to Advertisements Featuring Professional Models



Advertisements featuring professional models are also widely encountered, with **41%** of respondents stating that they see them *often* and **21.3%** *very often*. However, a noticeable share (**13.1%**) reported seeing such advertisements *rarely*, and a very small proportion indicated *never*. This suggests that while model-based advertising remains prevalent, it may be less dominant compared to real-people representation in certain digital spaces.

Trust in Advertisements Featuring Real People

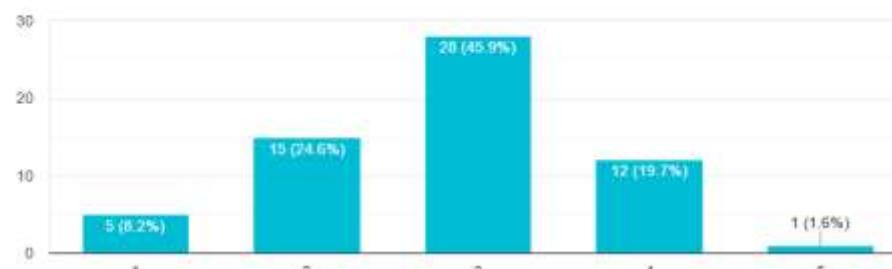


Responses indicate a generally positive trust orientation toward advertisements featuring real people. A combined **49.2%** of respondents selected agreement levels **4** or **5**, suggesting higher trust, while **39.3%** remained neutral. Only a small minority expressed low trust. This distribution suggests that real-people advertising is more likely to be perceived as credible or sincere, even if some respondents maintain cautious neutrality.

Perceived Credibility of Model-Based Advertisements

Ads with professional models seem credible.

61 responses

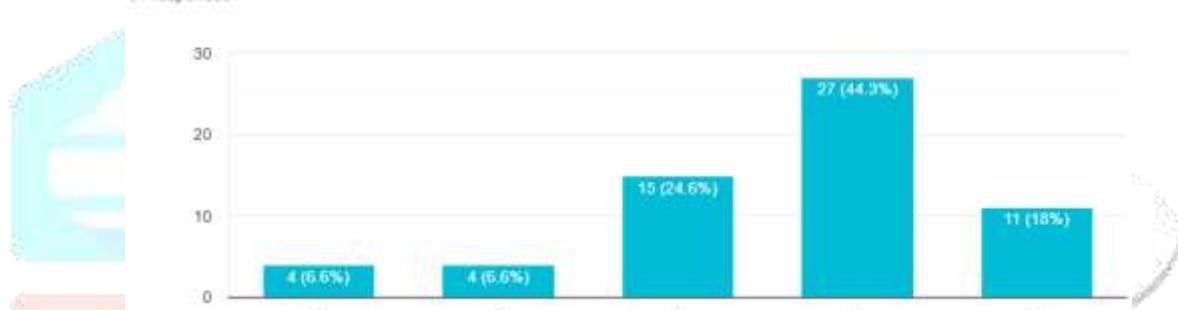


In contrast, credibility perceptions of advertisements featuring professional models were more mixed. While **19.7%** expressed agreement that such ads are credible, the largest share (**45.9%**) selected a neutral response. Additionally, **32.8%** leaned toward disagreement. This indicates that model-based advertising may struggle to establish strong credibility among Gen Z, often being viewed as polished but not necessarily trustworthy.

Relatability of Advertisements Featuring Everyday People

I relate more to ads that show everyday people.

61 responses

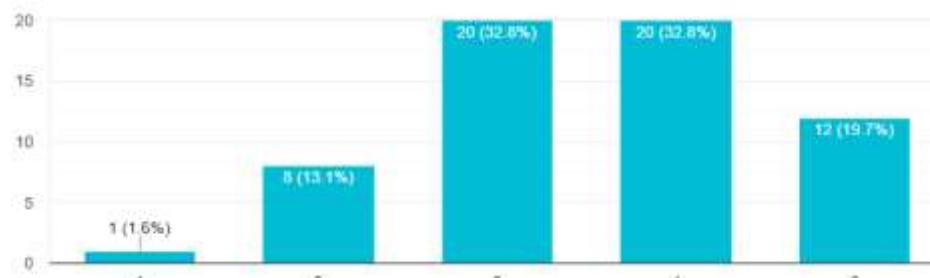


Relatability emerged as a strong factor in favour of real-people advertising. A majority of respondents (**62.3%**) agreed or strongly agreed that they relate more to advertisements showing everyday people. Neutral responses accounted for **24.6%**, while only a small proportion reported low relatability. This reinforces the idea that representation resembling real life enhances emotional connection for Gen Z audiences.

Relatability of Model-Based Advertisements

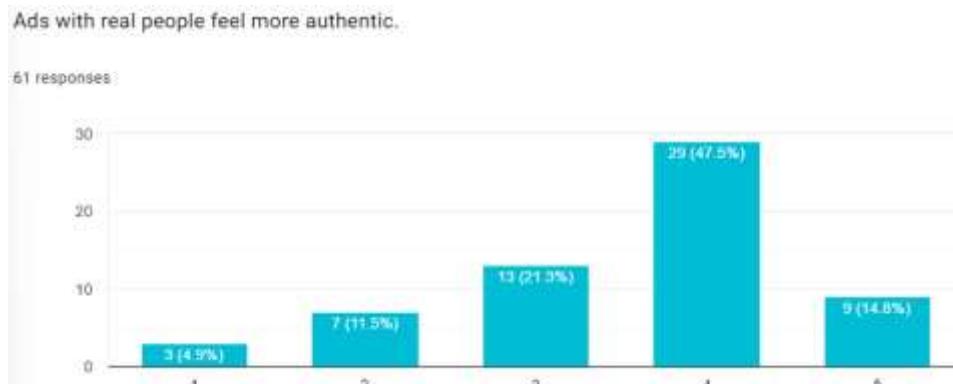
Model-based ads feel less relatable to me.

61 responses



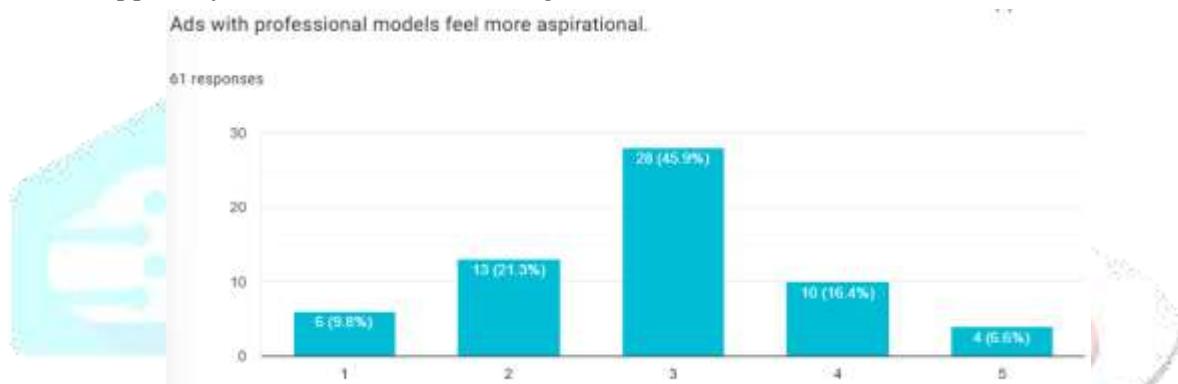
When asked whether model-based advertisements feel less relatable, responses were more evenly distributed. Approximately **52.5%** agreed or strongly agreed, while **32.8%** remained neutral. This suggests that although many respondents experience lower relatability with professional models, a substantial portion does not completely reject this advertising style, reflecting diverse perception within Gen Z.

Perceived Authenticity of Real-People Advertising



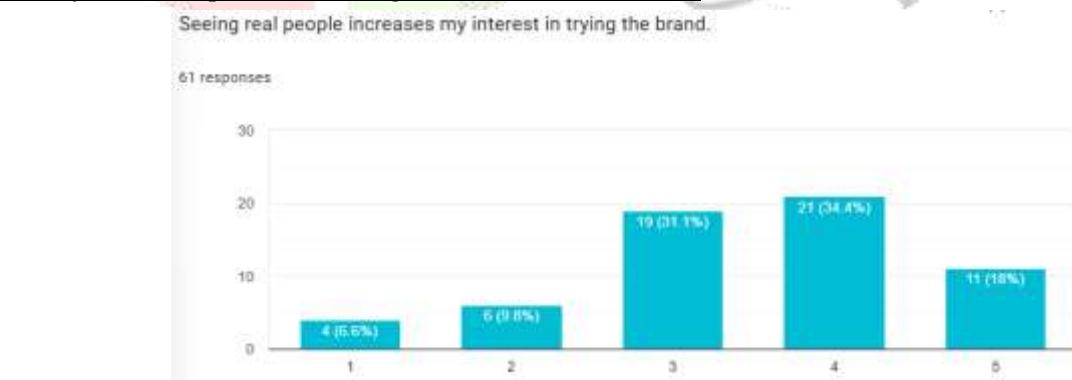
Authenticity was strongly associated with real-people advertisements. Nearly **62.3%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that ads featuring real people feel more authentic, while **21.3%** selected neutral responses. This finding highlights authenticity as a key emotional advantage of real-people representation in digital brand communication.

Aspirational Appeal of Model-Based Advertising



Model-based advertisements were more closely associated with aspiration. While **22.9%** of respondents agreed that such ads feel aspirational, the largest group (**45.9%**) selected a neutral response. This suggests that although professional models can create aspirational imagery, this appeal may not be strongly felt by a majority of Gen Z consumers.

Influence of Real-People Advertising on Purchase Intention

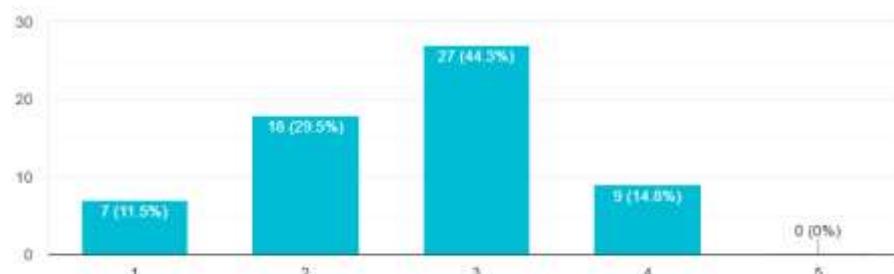


A combined **52.4%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that seeing real people in advertisements increases their interest in trying a brand. Neutral responses accounted for **31.1%**, while relatively few respondents expressed disagreement. This indicates that authenticity and relatability may positively influence purchase consideration among Gen Z.

Influence of Model-Based Advertising on Purchase Decisions

Ads with professional models positively influence my purchase decisions.

61 responses

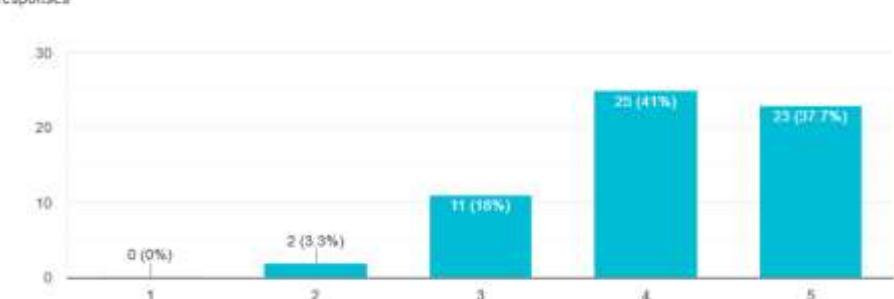


In comparison, advertisements featuring professional models showed weaker influence on purchase decisions. Only **14.8%** agreed that such ads positively influence their buying decisions, while **44.3%** selected neutral responses and **41%** leaned toward disagreement. This suggests limited persuasive power of model-based advertising in driving direct purchase behaviour among Gen Z respondents.

Role of Brand Trust Compared to Advertising

Brand trust is something I rely on more than advertising when making purchase decisions.

61 responses

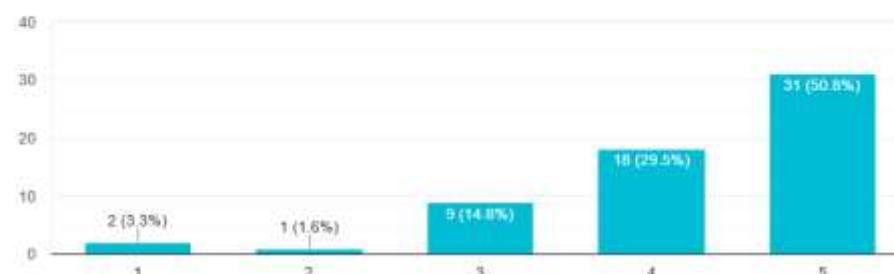


Most respondents (**78.7%**) agreed or strongly agreed that they rely more on brand trust than on advertising when making purchase decisions. **18%** remained neutral, and only **3.3%** disagreed, highlighting the dominant role of trust over advertising in Gen Z's buying decisions.

Influence of Positive Past Brand Experience on Repeat Purchase

Positive past experiences with a brand make me more likely to buy from it again.

61 responses



A large majority of respondents (**80.3%**) agreed or strongly agreed that positive past experiences with a brand make them more likely to buy from it again. Only **4.9%** disagreed, while **14.8%** selected a neutral response, indicating that prior brand experience strongly influences repeat purchase behaviour among Gen Z.

Overall Advertising Influence on Buying Decisions



When asked which type of advertising influences buying decisions more, **36.1%** selected advertisements featuring real people, while **37.7%** indicated that both real-people and model-based advertising influence them equally. A smaller proportion (**21.3%**) reported that neither type has a strong influence. This suggests that while real-people advertising has a slight edge, effectiveness may depend on context and execution rather than representation alone.

VI. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

An exploratory study that was done revealed strong evidence of how Gen Z interprets and reacts to various representation forms of online advertising of brands. Gen Z across various dimensions such as trust, relatability, emotional response, and purchase intention. Advertisements featuring real people tend to generate more favourable responses than those featuring professional models.

One of the most prominent findings is the closer association between advertising from real people and trust. A greater number of respondents indicated that they trusted more the advertisement with everyday individuals, thus showing that the realistic portrayals dispel the viewers' skepticism and foster a higher level of honesty. On the other hand, ads with professional models were mostly perceived neutrally, thus indicating that even though such ads look polished, they do not always mean that Gen Z consumers will see them as credible.

Relatability also became a key differentiator. Participants declared that they were significantly more connected to advertisement that showcased everyday people and real-life scenarios. This finding is consistent with the idea of the Gen Z being representation-conscious to the extent that they demand that their own experiences and identities be mirrored for them to be receptive of the brand messages that come from them which they then see as more relatable and not as idealized. Although advertising using model may not have been entirely rejected, a larger percentage of respondents deemed such ads as less relatable.

Emotional responses further explain these differences. Advertisements featuring real people were strongly associated with feelings of authenticity and connection, while professional models were more closely linked to aspiration. However, aspirational appeal alone appeared insufficient to drive stronger engagement or purchase intention among Gen Z, suggesting that emotional realism may be more persuasive than idealized imagery in digital environments.

As far as the behavioural outcomes are concerned, real-people advertising demonstrated a more significant effect on purchase intention and brand consideration. The respondents conveyed that they are more willing to try or consider a certain brand if the ads are genuine and relatable. Nevertheless, these results also show that ads alone cannot be the sole driving force behind making decisions. On top of that, trust in a brand and nice experiences in the past were the factors that had the major influence on the purchasing and repurchasing behaviour, thus most of the time the impact of advertising representation was overshadowed by these factors.

Overall, the findings imply that authenticity-driven tactics to represent Gen Z have a stronger impact as opposed to the other strategies where either real or fictional characters are used. The preference of using real people reflects a majority of attributes such as transparency, trust, and emotional connection in contemporary consumer behavior. For brands targeting Gen Z, these findings imply that long-term relationship building and credible representation may be more effective than relying solely on idealized or aspirational imagery.

VII. CONCLUSION

This research was aimed at finding out how Gen Z perceives brand advertisements if they use real people or professional models. Besides the emphasis on trust, the focus was also on relatability, emotional response, and purchase intention. The results revealed that the style of representation plays a meaningful role in shaping Gen Z's responses to online brand communication.

In general, ads with real people were considered by Gen Z as more trustworthy, relatable, and authentic as opposed to the ones that used professional models. These qualities were found to positively influence brand consideration and willingness to try a product or service. While model-based advertisements were associated with aspirational appeal, they were less effective in establishing credibility or driving purchase intention among respondents.

The study further reveals that advertisement does not work in isolation when it comes to influencing Gen Z's purchasing behavior. Trust in a brand and nice experiences in the past were the main factors that led to purchase and repurchase decisions, thus overshadowing the effect of advertising alone. This means that while representation may attract attention and influence perception, brand performance in the long run will depend on the brand's delivery, reliability, and relationship-building.

Since this was an exploratory study with a small sample size, the results are more of a hint than a generalizable conclusion. Future research could expand the sample, compare different cultural contexts, or examine specific industries to gain deeper insight into how representation influences consumer behavior. Despite of these limitations, the study contributes to a growing body of research emphasizing the importance of authenticity and trust in engaging Gen Z consumers in digital environments.

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