

Understanding Gen Z Consumers' Experiences in Building Online Social Capital with Brands on Vietnamese Social Media Platforms: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract. The proliferation of social commerce has fundamentally transformed how consumers interact with brands, yet limited research explores the lived experiences of digital natives in building online social capital with brands in emerging markets. This phenomenological study investigates how Gen Z consumers (aged 18-27) in Vietnam experience and construct online social capital with brands across major social media platforms including Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and Zalo. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 28 Gen Z consumers, we employed Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis to uncover the essence of their experiences. Our findings reveal six interconnected themes: (1) authenticity as the foundation of trust, (2) participatory co-creation and empowerment, (3) community belonging beyond transactions, (4) transparency as a trust mechanism, (5) social validation through peer networks, and (6) platform-specific engagement dynamics. These themes demonstrate that Gen Z consumers strategically cultivate both bridging and bonding social capital through distinct pathways that prioritize genuine relationships, value co-creation, and community integration over purely transactional exchanges. Our study extends Social Capital Theory to the digital native generation in emerging markets, revealing how cultural values and platform affordances shape social capital formation. The findings offer theoretical contributions by developing a Gen Z-specific framework of online social capital construction and practical implications for brands seeking authentic engagement with this influential consumer segment.

Keywords: Gen Z Consumers, Online Social Capital, Social Commerce, Phenomenological Study, Vietnam, Brand Engagement, Social Media Platforms.

1. Introduction

The digital revolution has fundamentally reshaped consumer-brand relationships, with social media platforms becoming primary spaces for commercial and social interactions (Chong *et al.*, 2024). Social commerce, defined as commerce activities embedded within social media environments, has experienced exponential growth globally, with the market projected to exceed \$4.17 trillion by 2029 (Mordor Intelligence, 2024). This transformation is particularly pronounced in emerging Asian markets, where mobile-first consumers seamlessly blend social networking with purchasing behaviors.

Vietnam represents a compelling context for examining these phenomena. With over 77 million social media users and a 76.5% internet penetration rate as of 2024, Vietnam ranks among the world's most digitally engaged populations. The nation's social commerce landscape has evolved rapidly, driven by platforms such as Facebook (72 million users), TikTok (52 million users), Instagram (18 million users), and the locally dominant messaging app Zalo (75 million users). Vietnamese consumers spend an average of 6 hours and 38 minutes daily on the internet, with 2 hours and 32 minutes dedicated specifically to social media—significantly exceeding global averages.

Within this digital ecosystem, Generation Z—individuals born between 1997 and 2012—has emerged as a transformative consumer force. In Vietnam, Gen Z comprises approximately 15 million individuals, representing 15.6% of the population and wielding substantial purchasing power estimated at \$14 billion annually. Unlike previous generations, Vietnamese Gen Z consumers are digital natives who have never known a world without smartphones and social media. Their approach to consumption fundamentally differs from predecessors, characterized by values-driven purchasing, desire for authentic brand relationships, and sophisticated use of digital platforms for information gathering and social validation.

Social Capital Theory (SCT) provides a robust theoretical lens for understanding how individuals derive value from their network relationships (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Originally developed to explain offline social networks, SCT has been extended to online contexts, distinguishing between bridging social capital (weak ties providing access to diverse information and opportunities) and bonding social capital (strong ties offering emotional support and solidarity) (Williams, 2006). Recent research demonstrates that online social capital significantly influences various outcomes in digital commerce, including purchase intentions, brand loyalty, and business performance (Chen & Xing, 2026; Q. Zhang & Ahmad, 2024).

However, existing literature reveals three critical gaps. First, the overwhelming majority of social capital research employs quantitative methodologies that measure relationships between variables but fail to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of how individuals actually construct and experience social capital online (Lee & Hallak, 2020; Nguyen Dang *et al.*, 2025). While studies have quantified the impact of bridging and bonding social capital on outcomes such as purchase intentions and loyalty (Horng & Wu, 2020; Munzel *et al.*, 2018; Rooj *et al.*, 2025), we lack deep understanding of how consumers subjectively experience and interpret these relational processes. Second, research has predominantly focused on Western contexts or examined specific platforms like WeChat in China (Chen & Xing, 2026), leaving emerging Southeast Asian markets underexplored. Vietnam's unique digital ecosystem—characterized by platform diversity, collectivist cultural values, and rapid social commerce adoption—may produce distinct patterns of social capital formation that existing theories inadequately explain. Third, insufficient attention has been devoted to generational differences in online social capital construction. Gen Z possesses fundamentally different digital literacy, platform behaviors, and relationship expectations compared to older generations (Perez Fernandez *et al.*, 2024). Their lifelong immersion in digital environments suggests they may construct and leverage online social capital through mechanisms that differ substantially from those identified in research with older cohorts. Understanding Gen Z's experiences is particularly crucial given their emerging dominance as consumers and their role in shaping future commerce paradigms.

This study addresses these gaps through an in-depth phenomenological investigation of how

Vietnamese Gen Z consumers experience building online social capital with brands. Phenomenology, as a qualitative methodology, seeks to understand the essence of lived experiences from participants' perspectives (Giorgi, 2009), making it ideally suited to uncover the subjective meanings and processes underlying social capital formation.

Our research is guided by three overarching questions:

RQ1: How do Gen Z consumers experience and construct online social capital with brands on Vietnamese social media platforms?

RQ2: What factors influence Gen Z consumers' online social capital building processes with brands?

RQ3: How does online social capital with brands influence Gen Z consumers' purchase decision-making?

These questions aim to produce rich, contextual understanding that complements and extends existing quantitative findings in the social capital literature.

This research makes several important contributions. Theoretically, it extends Social Capital Theory by revealing how digital natives in emerging markets construct and experience online social capital, potentially identifying novel mechanisms and dimensions overlooked in previous research. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of phenomenological inquiry in understanding complex relational phenomena in digital environments. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for brands, platform designers, and marketers seeking authentic engagement with the influential Gen Z segment.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature on social capital theory, Gen Z characteristics, and social commerce in Vietnam. Section 3 details our phenomenological methodology, including sampling, data collection, and analysis procedures. Section 4 presents our findings organized around six emergent themes. Section 5 discusses theoretical and practical implications, while Section 6 concludes with limitations and future research directions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Capital Theory in Digital Contexts

Social capital, broadly conceptualized as resources embedded in social networks that facilitate action (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), has proven remarkably applicable to understanding online interactions. Coleman (1988) established social capital as arising from network structures that enable information flow, establish norms, and create trust. Putnam (2000) further distinguished between bridging social capital—derived from weak ties connecting diverse groups—and bonding social capital—emerging from strong ties within close-knit groups. This distinction has become foundational in digital research.

Williams (2006) pioneering work demonstrated that these concepts transfer to online environments, developing validated scales showing that internet users cultivate both bridging and bonding social capital through digital platforms. Bridging capital online provides access to novel information, diverse perspectives, and weak-tie networks spanning geographic and social boundaries (Ellison *et al.*, 2014). Bonding capital online facilitates emotional support, solidarity, and mobilization of resources within close relationships (Ellison *et al.*, 2011).

Recent scholarship has examined how online social capital influences various outcomes. In e-commerce contexts, structural, cognitive, and relational social capital dimensions enhance consumer loyalty (Cheung *et al.*, 2025). In social commerce specifically, bonding and bridging capital increase purchase intentions and impulse buying (Ghahtarani *et al.*, 2020; Q. Zhang & Ahmad, 2024). For entrepreneurs, online social capital facilitates business performance improvements (Reniasi *et al.*, 2025), knowledge sharing (Razmerita *et al.*, 2016), and access to resources (Smith *et al.*, 2017).

Network benefits—tangible and intangible resources derived from social capital—constitute critical mediating mechanisms. Adler and Kwon (2002) identified information benefits (access to

knowledge and advice), influence benefits (ability to affect others' decisions), and solidarity benefits (goodwill and support) as key dimensions. Research confirms these benefits mediate relationships between social capital and outcomes such as business performance (Chen & Xing, 2026) and well-being (Munzel *et al.*, 2018).

However, most studies employ variance-based quantitative methodologies (surveys, PLS-SEM) that establish correlational relationships but cannot illuminate the subjective experiences, meanings, and processes through which individuals actually build and leverage social capital online. This represents a significant limitation given social capital's fundamentally relational and experiential nature.

2.2. Research Gaps and Study Positioning

This review reveals three interconnected gaps. First, social capital research relies heavily on quantitative methodologies that measure outcomes but not experiences. While we know online social capital influences purchase intentions and business performance, we lack understanding of how consumers actually experience and construct these relational resources. Second, research concentrates on Western contexts or specific platforms (particularly WeChat in China), leaving emerging Southeast Asian markets and platform diversity underexplored. Third, despite Gen Z's importance and distinct characteristics, research has not examined how digital natives specifically experience online social capital construction with brands.

This study addresses these gaps through phenomenological investigation of Vietnamese Gen Z consumers' lived experiences building online social capital with brands. By focusing on subjective experiences rather than objective measures, employing qualitative depth rather than quantitative breadth, and examining an understudied context (Vietnam) and population (Gen Z), we aim to generate novel theoretical insights while producing practically relevant understanding.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Philosophy and Design

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, which holds that reality is socially constructed and that understanding emerges through interpretation of participants' subjective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Khoa *et al.*, 2023). Interpretivism aligns with our goal of understanding how Gen Z consumers experience and make sense of online social capital construction—phenomena that are inherently subjective, contextual, and meaning-laden.

Within interpretivism, we employ phenomenology as our specific methodological approach. Phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of lived experiences by exploring how individuals consciously experience phenomena in their lifeworld (Zahavi, 2025). Phenomenological research aims to describe what participants experience and how they experience it, bracketing researchers' preconceptions to access participants' lived realities.

We specifically draw on descriptive phenomenology, which emphasizes rigorous description of experiences as participants consciously live them (Abraham & P, 2025). This approach suits our research objectives: rather than testing predetermined hypotheses about social capital's effects, we seek to understand how Gen Z consumers actually experience the processes of building, maintaining, and leveraging online social capital with brands.

3.2. Participant Selection and Sampling

We employed purposive sampling to recruit participants meeting specific criteria designed to ensure rich, relevant data. Inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) be aged 18-27 years (Gen Z cohort), (2) be Vietnamese nationals residing in Vietnam, (3) actively use at least two social media platforms (Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, or Zalo) for brand engagement, (4) have followed or interacted with

brands on social media for at least six months, and (5) have made at least one purchase influenced by social media brand interactions in the past year.

We pursued maximum variation sampling within these criteria to capture diverse experiences across gender, geographic location (urban/rural), educational background, platform preferences, and product categories of interest. This variation enhances transferability of findings by demonstrating patterns across different contexts (Patton, 2014). Recruitment proceeded through multiple channels to avoid sampling bias. We distributed recruitment posts on university social media groups, utilized snowball sampling by asking initial participants to refer others, and engaged local community organizations. Interested individuals completed a screening questionnaire confirming eligibility before being invited to participate.

Data collection continued until reaching theoretical saturation—the point where new interviews yielded no substantially new themes or insights (Saunders, 2018). Saturation occurred after 28 interviews, consistent with recommendations for phenomenological studies.

Table 1 presents participant demographics. Our final sample comprised 28 Gen Z consumers (16 female (F), 12 male (M)) aged 18-27 ($M = 22.46$, $SD = 2.6$). Participants came from major cities including Hanoi ($n = 9$), Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) ($n = 11$), Da Nang ($n = 5$), and other cities ($n = 3$). Educational levels ranged from current undergraduate students ($n = 11$) to bachelor's degree holders ($n = 12$) to master's students ($n = 5$). Participants reported diverse platform usage patterns and engaged with brands across categories including fashion, beauty, technology, food/beverage, and lifestyle products.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

| Participant ID | Age | Gender | Location | Education Level | Social Media Platforms | Product Categories Engaged |
|----------------|-----|--------|----------|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| P01 | 23 | F | Hanoi | Bachelor's degree | Facebook, TikTok | Fashion, Beauty |
| P02 | 21 | M | HCMC | Undergraduate student | TikTok, Instagram | Technology, Gaming |
| P03 | 25 | F | HCMC | Master's student | Instagram, Facebook | Beauty, Lifestyle |
| P04 | 19 | M | Hanoi | Undergraduate student | TikTok, Zalo | Food/Beverage, Fashion |
| P05 | 27 | F | Da Nang | Master's student | Facebook, Instagram | Fashion, Lifestyle, Beauty |
| P06 | 22 | M | HCMC | Bachelor's degree | TikTok, Instagram | Technology, Fashion |
| P07 | 20 | F | Hanoi | Undergraduate student | Instagram, TikTok | Beauty, Fashion |
| P08 | 24 | M | HCMC | Bachelor's degree | Facebook, Zalo | Technology, Food/Beverage |
| P09 | 26 | F | Hanoi | Master's student | Instagram, Facebook | Lifestyle, Beauty, Fashion |
| P10 | 18 | F | Can Tho | Undergraduate student | TikTok, Zalo | Fashion, Food/Beverage |
| P11 | 23 | M | HCMC | Bachelor's degree | TikTok, Instagram | Technology, Fashion |
| P12 | 21 | F | Hanoi | Undergraduate student | Instagram, TikTok | Beauty, Fashion, Lifestyle |
| P13 | 25 | M | Da Nang | Bachelor's degree | Facebook, Zalo | Food/Beverage, Technology |
| P14 | 22 | F | HCMC | Bachelor's degree | TikTok, Facebook | Fashion, Beauty |
| P15 | 20 | M | Hanoi | Undergraduate student | TikTok, Instagram | Gaming, Technology |

| Participant ID | Age | Gender | Location | Education Level | Social Media Platforms | Product Categories Engaged |
|----------------|-----|--------|-----------|-----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| P16 | 24 | F | HCMC | Master's student | Instagram, Facebook | Beauty, Lifestyle, Fashion |
| P17 | 19 | F | Hai Phong | Undergraduate student | TikTok, Zalo | Fashion, Food/Beverage |
| P18 | 26 | M | Da Nang | Bachelor's degree | Facebook, Zalo | Technology, Food/Beverage |
| P19 | 23 | F | Hanoi | Bachelor's degree | Instagram, TikTok | Beauty, Fashion |
| P20 | 21 | M | HCMC | Undergraduate student | TikTok, Instagram | Technology, Gaming, Fashion |
| P21 | 27 | F | Da Nang | Master's student | Facebook, Instagram | Lifestyle, Beauty |
| P22 | 22 | F | HCMC | Bachelor's degree | TikTok, Facebook | Fashion, Beauty, Food/Beverage |
| P23 | 20 | M | Hanoi | Undergraduate student | TikTok, Zalo | Food/Beverage, Fashion |
| P24 | 24 | F | HCMC | Bachelor's degree | Instagram, Facebook | Beauty, Lifestyle |
| P25 | 18 | F | Nha Trang | Undergraduate student | TikTok, Instagram | Fashion, Beauty |
| P26 | 25 | M | Hanoi | Bachelor's degree | Facebook, Zalo | Technology, Food/Beverage |
| P27 | 23 | F | HCMC | Bachelor's degree | Instagram, TikTok | Fashion, Beauty, Lifestyle |
| P28 | 21 | M | Da Nang | Undergraduate student | TikTok, Facebook | Gaming, Technology, Fashion |

3.3. Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews as our primary data collection method. Semi-structured interviews allow exploration of predetermined topics while remaining flexible to pursue emergent themes and participant-led directions. This format balances structure with openness, facilitating both systematic comparison across interviews and responsiveness to individual experiences.

The interview guide comprised open-ended questions organized into thematic sections: (1) social media usage patterns and platform preferences, (2) experiences following and engaging with brands, (3) relationship development with brands over time, (4) specific interactions and their meanings, (5) influence on purchase decisions, and (6) reflections on the nature of brand relationships. Example questions included: "Can you walk me through your experience of first connecting with a brand on social media?", "Tell me about a time when you felt really connected to a brand online—what made that experience meaningful?", "How do you decide whether to trust a brand you encounter on social media?"

Probing questions encouraged elaboration, such as "Can you tell me more about that?", "What did that mean to you?", "How did that make you feel?". This technique helped access deeper layers of experience beyond surface descriptions.

All interviews were conducted online via Zoom or Google Meet between June and September 2025, accommodating participants' schedules and geographic distribution. Online interviews offered advantages including access to geographically dispersed participants, comfort for digital-native participants in familiar environments, and efficient recording. Interviews lasted 45-68 minutes ($M = 54$ minutes), were audio-recorded with permission, and were professionally transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese. Transcripts were subsequently translated into English by bilingual researchers fluent in

both languages, with back-translation verification to ensure accuracy.

During interviews, we practiced *epoché* (bracketing)—setting aside our assumptions and preconceptions to remain open to participants' experiences. We maintained reflexive journals documenting our thoughts, reactions, and potential biases throughout data collection and analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis

We analyzed data using thematic analysis of Y. Zhang and Deng (2024), a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. Thematic analysis aligns with phenomenology's goal of uncovering essential meanings in lived experiences while providing systematic procedures enhancing reliability. Analysis proceeded through six phases:

Phase 1: Familiarization with data. We read and re-read transcripts multiple times, noting initial observations. This immersive process generated preliminary understanding of data breadth and depth.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes. We systematically coded interesting features across the dataset. Using NVivo 12 software, we identified 287 initial codes representing specific semantic content. For example, statements about seeking peer opinions received code "peer validation seeking"; descriptions of brand responsiveness received code "two-way communication."

Phase 3: Searching for themes. We collated codes into potential themes representing patterned meanings across the dataset. This involved sorting codes into theme clusters, using visual mapping to explore relationships. For instance, codes related to "peer validation seeking," "social proof," and "friend recommendations" clustered into a potential theme about social influence.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes. We refined themes through two levels of review. First, we checked whether coded extracts formed coherent patterns within each theme. Second, we assessed whether themes accurately reflected the entire dataset. This iterative process involved collapsing, splitting, and renaming themes. For example, an initial theme "brand transparency" merged with "authentic communication" to form the broader theme "transparency as trust mechanism."

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes. We developed clear definitions and names for each theme, identifying its essence and scope. We determined how each theme related to others, forming an overall thematic narrative. Final themes were named to capture their central organizing concept, such as "Authenticity as the Foundation."

Phase 6: Producing the report. We selected vivid, compelling extract examples illustrating each theme's essence. We wove analytical narrative connecting themes to research questions and existing literature.

Throughout analysis, we employed constant comparison, continuously comparing new data with existing codes and themes to ensure consistency while remaining open to new insights. We held regular research team meetings to discuss interpretations, challenge assumptions, and reach consensus on thematic structure.

4. Findings

Our analysis revealed six interconnected themes capturing the essence of how Vietnamese Gen Z consumers experience building online social capital with brands. These themes illuminate the processes, meanings, and factors shaping their relational experiences across social media platforms. We present each theme with detailed description, illustrative quotations, and analytical interpretation.

4.1. Theme 1: Authenticity as the Foundation

The most fundamental aspect of Gen Z consumers' experiences in building online social capital with brands centers on authenticity—the perception that brands present genuine, unfiltered identities rather than carefully crafted marketing personas. Authenticity emerged as a prerequisite for any meaningful relationship development, with participants consistently describing how they assess brand authenticity through multiple signals and how perceived inauthenticity immediately terminates potential

connections.

Participants described authenticity assessment as an active, ongoing process requiring continuous evaluation across interactions. They distinguished sharply between brands that "try too hard" or employ obvious marketing tactics versus those that "just be themselves" and communicate naturally. P16, a 24-year-old female fashion enthusiast, articulated this distinction:

"When I first follow a brand, I spend time just watching them. I don't just look at their ads—I look at how they respond to comments, how they handle complaints, whether they admit mistakes. The brands I really connect with, they're not trying to be perfect. They show behind-the-scenes, they admit when something goes wrong, they laugh at themselves sometimes. It feels like there's actual humans running the account, not a corporate robot. Those are the brands I trust enough to engage with and eventually buy from."

This quotation illustrates several key dimensions of authenticity assessment. First, participants evaluate consistency between polished marketing content and informal interactions (comment responses). Second, they value vulnerability and mistake acknowledgment over carefully managed perfection. Third, they seek evidence of human presence behind brand accounts. Fourth, authenticity serves as a threshold condition for deeper engagement and eventual purchase.

Multiple participants contrasted authentic brands with those perceived as inauthentic. P06, a 22-year-old male technology enthusiast, described his experience:

"I can spot fake brands immediately. They post these super polished photos with generic captions full of hashtags. Every post is 'buy now!' or 'sale today!' They never respond to comments except with copy-paste answers. When someone complains, they ignore it or delete the comment. These brands are just using social media as another advertising channel. They don't actually care about connecting with customers. I might see their ads, but I would never follow them or buy from them. Why would I? There's no relationship there."

This contrast highlights what authenticity is not: overly polished content, sales-focused messaging, lack of genuine interaction, and defensive responses to criticism. Participants described such brands as "soulless," "fake," and "just trying to take my money."

The importance of authenticity appeared particularly pronounced for Vietnamese Gen Z given their cultural context. Growing up in an environment where rapid commercialization has bred consumer skepticism, they developed sophisticated radar for detecting marketing manipulation. P19, a 23-year-old female from Hanoi, explained:

"Our generation grew up seeing so many scams and fake products, especially online. We learned early that you can't trust everything you see. So now, we're very careful. We investigate before we trust. With brands on social media, we look for proof that they're real, that they care about quality, that they care about customers. If they're authentic, we can start building trust. If not, we move on immediately."

This skepticism, born from negative experiences in Vietnam's rapidly evolving digital marketplace, makes authenticity assessment a protective mechanism. Participants view their ability to detect authenticity as a crucial skill for navigating online commerce safely.

Interestingly, participants distinguished between different types of authenticity across platforms. On TikTok, authenticity meant raw, unedited content showcasing products in real use scenarios. On Instagram, it meant aesthetic consistency reflecting genuine brand identity rather than trend-chasing. On Facebook, it meant transparent business practices and honest community management. P12, a 21-year-old using multiple platforms, noted:

"On TikTok, I love when brands post videos that aren't perfectly edited—when you can see the real product, real lighting, real people using it. It feels honest. On Instagram, I actually appreciate when brands have a clear aesthetic and stick with it. That's their authentic style. It's different types of authenticity for different platforms, but the key is that it feels real, not

fake."

This platform-specific understanding demonstrates Gen Z's sophisticated navigation of different social media contexts and their ability to assess authenticity through platform-appropriate lenses.

Authenticity functions as the foundation upon which all other forms of online social capital construction rest. Without perceived authenticity, participants refuse to invest time, attention, or emotional energy in brand relationships. With authenticity established, they become willing to progress toward deeper engagement, eventually forming the bonding and bridging connections that constitute online social capital.

4.2. Theme 2: Participatory Co-Creation and Empowerment

Beyond seeking authentic brands, Gen Z consumers actively desire participatory involvement in brand narratives, product development, and community building. This theme captures their experience of feeling empowered through co-creation opportunities and their preference for brands that position them as partners rather than passive consumers. Participants described how participatory experiences transform their relationships with brands from transactional to collaborative, strengthening both their emotional connection and their willingness to advocate.

Participants valued multiple forms of participation. At the most basic level, they appreciated brands soliciting and genuinely incorporating customer feedback. P07, a 20-year-old undergraduate, described her experience with a local cosmetics brand:

"This skincare brand I follow, they constantly ask what products we want to see next. They run polls in Instagram Stories, they ask questions in comments. And here's what's amazing—they actually listen. They released a sunscreen because we kept requesting it, and they showed the whole development process. They shared lab testing results, asked us to vote on packaging options, even sent samples to some community members for feedback before launching. I feel like I helped create that product. When it launched, of course I bought it. I felt proud, like it was partly mine."

This quotation illustrates how co-creation generates feelings of ownership, pride, and investment in brand success. By involving customers in development processes, brands transform them from external purchasers to insider participants with stake in outcomes. This shift fundamentally changes the nature of the relationship.

Co-creation extended beyond product development to content creation. Many participants described how brands encouraged and featured user-generated content (UGC), making customers feel valued and recognized. P01, a 23-year-old female fashion blogger, explained:

"My favorite clothing brand has this program where they repost customer photos. Not just model photos—real customers wearing their clothes in real life. I've been featured twice. Every time they repost my content, I feel seen and appreciated. It's not just about the exposure for my account. It's that they're showing they value real customers, not just professional models. They're saying 'you're part of our community, your style matters.' That makes me feel connected in a way that ads never could."

This experience reveals how featuring customer content validates individual consumers while simultaneously building community. When brands showcase diverse customer voices and styles, they signal that ordinary consumers are valued contributors, not just target markets. This recognition strengthens bonding social capital through emotional connection and bridging social capital by connecting featured customers with broader communities.

Participants particularly valued when brands involved them in decision-making beyond superficial choices. Several described experiences where brands solicited input on substantive issues like sustainability practices, pricing strategies, or social causes to support. P13, a 25-year-old male concerned about environmental issues, shared:

"There's this coffee brand I love that asked their social media community to vote on which

environmental cause they should support with their profits. They presented three options with detailed information, then we voted. The process felt respectful of our opinions. They didn't just pretend to care about our input—they gave us real decision-making power. When they announced results and showed how they were implementing our choice, I felt like I was part of something bigger than just buying coffee. I was part of a community making positive impact together."

This example demonstrates how shared decision-making on meaningful issues creates sense of collective purpose and community belonging. When brands treat customers as partners in value-driven decisions, they forge deeper emotional bonds and stronger community identity.

Participants contrasted empowering co-creation experiences with superficial engagement tactics. Several described frustration with brands that solicit feedback but never acknowledge or incorporate it, or that run "fake" polls where outcomes seem predetermined. P18, a 26-year-old with marketing background, noted:

"Some brands just do engagement for engagement's sake. They ask questions but don't care about answers. They run polls but the results don't matter. It's just to boost algorithm visibility. We can tell when it's genuine versus performative. Genuine co-creation makes me feel valued. Performative participation makes me feel manipulated and actually damages the relationship."

This distinction emphasizes that participatory experiences must be authentic to function effectively. Superficial engagement tactics risk backfiring by breeding cynicism rather than connection.

The desire for co-creation and empowerment reflects Gen Z's broader generational characteristics. Having grown up in participatory digital cultures (social media, gaming communities, collaborative platforms), they expect to be active contributors rather than passive recipients. They view brands that facilitate their participation as aligned with their values and deserving of their loyalty. Conversely, brands that position them as mere targets for marketing messages feel outdated and unappealing.

Co-creation experiences generate both bridging and bonding social capital. Through participation in broader brand communities, individuals build weak ties with diverse others sharing interests (bridging). Through meaningful involvement in brand narratives and values, they develop emotional bonds and loyalty (bonding). Together, these forms of capital strengthen their overall connection with brands and increase likelihood of continued engagement and advocacy.

4.3. Theme 3: Community Belonging Beyond Transactions

Participants consistently described how meaningful brand relationships extend far beyond purchase transactions to encompass **social belonging** within brand communities. This theme captures their experience of brands as social spaces where they connect with like-minded individuals, share interests and identities, and derive emotional fulfillment through community membership. For Gen Z consumers, successful brands create communities that meet social needs while commercial transactions become secondary consequences of community belonging.

Participants described how brand communities provide spaces for identity expression and validation. P22, a 22-year-old interested in sustainable living, explained:

"I follow this zero-waste lifestyle brand on Facebook. Their community group has become so important to me. It's not really about buying products—it's about connecting with people who share my values about sustainability. We share tips, encourage each other, celebrate small victories. When someone posts about struggling to maintain sustainable habits, everyone offers support. The brand facilitates this space, but the value comes from the community. Buying products from them feels like supporting 'my people,' not just shopping."

This quotation illustrates how brand communities serve functions beyond commerce: identity reinforcement, peer support, knowledge sharing, and social connection. The brand acts as facilitator

and convener, but the community itself provides the relational value. Purchase decisions become expressions of community membership and support rather than isolated transactions.

Multiple participants described how community belonging influences their purchase behavior in ways distinct from traditional marketing. Rather than responding to promotional messages, they buy to support "their" community, signal group membership, or contribute to collective goals. P02, a 21-year-old university student, shared:

"There's this indie bookstore that has an amazing Instagram community. The owner interacts with us constantly, we discuss books together, recommend things to each other. When I buy from them, it doesn't feel like a transaction. It feels like I'm supporting my community space, like I'm investing in keeping this place alive so we can keep gathering there, even if it's virtually. The act of purchasing has different meaning when it's within a community context."

This perspective reveals how community belonging transforms commerce's meaning. Purchases become contributions to collective good, expressions of solidarity, and investments in valued social spaces rather than self-interested economic exchanges. This shift strengthens emotional commitment and purchase loyalty beyond what promotional incentives could achieve.

Participants valued different aspects of community experience across platforms. Facebook groups facilitated structured discussions and information sharing through their format. TikTok communities formed around shared entertainment of brand content and collaborative trends. Instagram communities coalesced around aesthetic identity and lifestyle aspirations. Zalo groups enabled intimate, message-based connections with smaller numbers of highly engaged community members. P08, a 24-year-old actively participating across multiple platforms, described this diversity:

"Each platform's community feels different. In Facebook groups, we have deeper conversations about product experiences, recommendations, solutions to problems. On TikTok, the community feeling comes from participating in brand challenges and duets—it's more playful and creative. On Instagram, we bond over shared aesthetic and values through the visual story. The sense of belonging exists on all platforms but takes different forms based on what each platform enables."

This platform-aware understanding demonstrates Gen Z's sophisticated navigation of different community spaces and their ability to derive belonging from various interaction formats.

Importantly, participants distinguished between brands that genuinely foster community versus those that merely accumulate followers. Genuine community building requires consistent facilitation, authentic engagement, and creation of spaces for member-to-member interaction beyond brand-customer dyads. P09, a 26-year-old with strong opinions about marketing practices, articulated:

"Having lots of followers doesn't mean having community. Community requires the brand to actually facilitate connections between people, not just between brand and individuals. The best brands introduce community members to each other, highlight member contributions, create opportunities for collaboration. They build an ecosystem, not just an audience. Those are the brands I feel truly connected to because I'm connected to a whole community, not just to a corporate entity."

This insight reveals that bonding social capital with brands operates partly through bonds with community members. When brands facilitate strong member-to-member connections, individuals develop multilayered ties: direct bonds with the brand, bonds with community members sharing interests, and bonds with the collective community identity. This web of connections creates stronger, more resilient relationships than simple brand-customer dyads.

Community belonging also serves protective functions in Vietnam's e-commerce environment. Within trusted brand communities, members share experiences, warn about scams, provide authentic product reviews, and offer purchasing advice. These peer resources reduce risk in environments where consumers face uncertainty about product quality and seller reliability. P11, a 23-year-old who

experienced online shopping fraud, explained:

"I trust recommendations from brand communities much more than ads or even online reviews, because those can be fake. In a real community, people are honest about both positive and negative experiences. If I'm considering a product, I ask the community. Someone usually has experience and gives honest feedback. This makes me feel safer shopping online. The community acts like quality control that I trust more than any official certification."

This protective function highlights how bonding social capital within brand communities generates tangible benefits: access to trustworthy information, risk reduction, and decision-making support. These practical advantages complement emotional belonging to strengthen community value.

The experience of community belonging beyond transactions represents a distinctive aspect of Gen Z's relationship with brands. Unlike older generations who may view brand relationships primarily through commercial lenses, Gen Z seamlessly integrates commercial and social spheres. For them, brands that successfully create community spaces become valued social infrastructure, not merely product sources.

4.4. Theme 4: Trust Through Transparency

While authenticity serves as an initial foundation, participants described transparency—ongoing openness about business practices, processes, and challenges—as essential for deepening trust over time. This theme captures how Gen Z consumers continuously evaluate brands' willingness to share information honestly, including unflattering details, and how transparency serves as evidence of trustworthiness that enables relationship progression.

Participants valued multiple forms of transparency. Process transparency—showing how products are made, sourced, or developed—featured prominently. P23, a 20-year-old interested in ethical fashion, described:

"I follow this clothing brand that shows their entire supply chain. They post videos from their factories, introduce their workers by name, explain their material sourcing. They even shared when they had to change suppliers because the original one didn't meet ethical standards. That level of openness makes me trust them completely. I know exactly what I'm buying and can feel good about supporting them. Other brands just show finished products and expect me to trust them blindly. That doesn't work for my generation."

This quotation reveals how process transparency serves multiple functions. First, it provides information enabling informed decision-making aligned with values. Second, it demonstrates brand confidence in their practices—suggesting they have nothing to hide. Third, it shows respect for consumers' right to know about products they purchase. Together, these factors build trust more effectively than claims or certifications alone.

Participants particularly valued transparency about challenges and failures. Brands that openly acknowledged problems, explained what went wrong, and described corrective actions earned deeper trust than those projecting flawless images. P26, a 25-year-old male with professional work experience, shared

"A food delivery brand I use posted on social media about a data breach that affected customer information. They explained what happened, what data was compromised, what they were doing to fix it, and how they'd prevent future incidents. They didn't try to hide it or minimize it. My first reaction was concern, but their transparent handling actually increased my trust. I thought, 'this is a company that respects me enough to be honest even when it's uncomfortable.' I kept using their service because I trusted them to handle problems responsibly."

This example demonstrates how transparent problem handling can paradoxically strengthen rather than damage relationships. When brands respond to challenges with openness, accountability, and

corrective action, they signal trustworthiness and maturity. This contrasts with defensive responses or cover-up attempts that breed suspicion and erode trust.

Transparency about business decisions and reasoning also mattered. Participants appreciated brands explaining why products cost certain amounts, why they made specific strategic choices, or why they took particular stances on issues. P21, a 24-year-old female entrepreneur herself, explained:

"I respect brands that explain their reasoning. Like, if prices increase, tell me why—material costs went up, you're paying workers fairly, whatever the reason. Don't just raise prices and hope I don't notice. When brands share their business thinking, it makes me feel respected as an intelligent person, not just a wallet. It also helps me understand that there are real people making real decisions, not some faceless corporation just trying to maximize profits."

This transparency about business reasoning humanizes brands, builds understanding, and demonstrates respect for consumer intelligence. It shifts perception from "brand trying to extract money" to "organization making reasonable decisions for legitimate reasons."

Participants contrasted valued transparency with harmful opacity. Several described frustration with brands providing minimal information, using ambiguous language, or deflecting questions about practices. P16, a 22-year-old female highly conscious of ingredients in beauty products, noted:

"Some brands refuse to answer questions about ingredients or where they source materials. They hide behind vague language like 'proprietary formula' or 'trade secrets.' That immediately makes me suspicious. What are they hiding? Why can't they be transparent? I understand competitive concerns, but there's a difference between protecting genuine secrets and refusing basic transparency. Brands that won't be transparent don't deserve my trust or my money."

This reaction illustrates how opacity triggers suspicion rather than protecting brand interests. For Gen Z consumers raised in information-rich environments expecting free information flow, refusal to share basic details signals something problematic rather than reasonable business practice.

The importance of transparency relates to broader Vietnamese cultural context. In a market environment where consumers face significant information asymmetry and fraud risks, transparency serves as crucial differentiator between trustworthy and questionable actors. P19, mentioned earlier, connected this to Vietnamese e-commerce challenges:

"In Vietnam, online shopping still carries risks. You don't always get what you ordered, quality might not match descriptions, sellers might disappear after taking money. In this environment, transparency is how good brands separate themselves from scammers. When a brand is totally transparent—showing real products, real processes, real customer feedback—that immediately makes them stand out as trustworthy. Transparency isn't just nice to have; it's essential for building trust in our market."

This contextual understanding positions transparency not as optional nicety but as competitive necessity in trust-deficient environments. Brands demonstrating transparency successfully build social capital in contexts where trust is scarce and valuable.

Transparency functions as evidence validating authenticity claims made during initial relationship stages. While authenticity assessment begins with superficial signals (communication style, content approach), transparency provides substantive proof that brands genuinely operate according to claimed values. This deepens initial impressions into durable trust foundations enabling strong bonding social capital.

4.5. Theme 5: Social Validation Through Peer Networks

Participants consistently described how their **peer networks**—friends, family, and online acquaintances—profoundly influence their relationship formation with brands and purchase decisions. This theme captures how social validation through trusted ties serves as both catalyst for initial brand

engagement and ongoing reinforcement mechanism for continued relationships. Gen Z consumers leverage their social networks as information sources, risk reducers, and identity anchors in ways that shape brand-related experiences.

Peer recommendations emerged as the most trusted pathway to brand discovery. Participants described prioritizing friend and family suggestions over advertising, influencer endorsements, or organic discovery. P03, a 21-year-old male, articulated this preference:

"When I discover a brand through a friend's recommendation, I automatically trust it more than brands I find through ads or even through social media browsing. My friends know me, know my tastes and values. If they suggest something, they're basically pre-screening for me. Their recommendation carries weight that no amount of advertising can match. I'll check out brands my friends suggest immediately, while I'm skeptical of brands that just appear in my feed."

This quotation reveals how peer recommendations function as trust transfers. Trust in the recommending friend extends to the recommended brand, bypassing skepticism that greets unfamiliar brands. This mechanism—fundamental to bridging social capital—enables brands to access new consumers through existing network ties.

Beyond initial discovery, participants described seeking peer validation before making purchases, especially for higher-involvement products. This validation-seeking behavior manifests across multiple forms: asking friends directly for opinions, posting "should I buy this?" questions in social media, checking whether connections already use products, and observing peer reactions to brand content. P08, a 23-year-old female fashion enthusiast, explained her validation process:

"Before I buy something, especially if it's expensive or from a new brand, I do research among my friends. I'll post the product in my close friends Instagram Story and ask what people think. Or I'll message friends who I know use similar products. I'm looking for validation that it's a good choice, but I'm also reducing risk. If several friends vouch for it, I feel much more confident purchasing. It's like they're protecting me from making a bad decision."

This behavior illustrates several key dynamics. First, peer networks serve information-gathering functions, providing experiential knowledge complementing official brand information. Second, validation from multiple peers creates consensus that reduces perceived risk. Third, the validation-seeking process itself strengthens social bonds as friends help each other make decisions. Fourth, successful validation leads to purchases that friends can later reference as shared experiences, further strengthening relationships.

Participants distinguished between recommendations from close ties (family, close friends) versus weak ties (casual acquaintances, online connections). Close tie recommendations carried greater weight for personal products reflecting identity (fashion, beauty) or requiring significant trust (health products, financial services). Weak tie recommendations were valued for discovering novel options and gathering diverse perspectives. P08, a 24-year-old male with extensive online networks, described:

"Recommendations from close friends carry the most weight because they really know me. But I also get value from my broader network on social media. People I'm not close with might introduce me to brands I'd never otherwise encounter because their tastes differ from mine. That's how I discover interesting niche brands. So both types of connections are useful, just in different ways."

This differentiated understanding reflects the distinction between bonding capital (close ties) and bridging capital (weak ties). Gen Z consumers strategically leverage both for different purposes: bonding capital for trusted guidance on important decisions, bridging capital for discovery and exposure to diversity.

Social validation also manifests in observational learning—watching what brands peers engage with, which products they purchase and showcase, and how they interact with brand content.

Participants described these observations influencing their own brand perceptions and behaviors. P14, a 22-year-old female, shared:

"I notice which brands my friends follow and engage with. If I see multiple people I respect interacting with a brand—liking posts, commenting, sharing content—that signals to me that it's worth paying attention to. It's subtle influence, not deliberate recommendation, but it shapes my perception. I think, 'if people I admire connect with this brand, maybe I should check them out.' It's social proof happening organically."

This observational social validation occurs constantly as participants consume social media content. The aggregate effect of seeing trusted others engage with brands creates familiarity, positive associations, and curiosity that lower barriers to initial engagement. Brands that successfully engage multiple members of a social network thus benefit from compounding validation effects.

Importantly, negative peer feedback carried even greater weight than positive validation. Participants described immediately disengaging from brands if friends reported negative experiences, regardless of brand's other positive attributes. P03, a 25-year-old, emphasized:

"If a friend tells me they had a bad experience with a brand—poor quality, bad customer service, dishonest practices—I immediately cross that brand off my list. Even if I'd been interested before, negative word-of-mouth from someone I trust is a dealbreaker. Why would I risk it when there are so many other options? I trust my friends' experiences more than any brand marketing."

This asymmetric weighting of negative information reflects risk-aversion and trust in peer networks' protective function. Friends warning about problems are providing valuable protective service that participants reciprocate by heeding warnings and sharing their own cautionary experiences.

The centrality of peer networks in brand relationships reflects Gen Z's highly social orientation and collectivist values within Vietnamese culture. Decisions are rarely made in isolation but rather through consultation, validation, and social comparison within trusted networks. Brands that successfully tap into these network dynamics—through referral programs, community building, or user-generated content encouraging sharing—gain access to powerful validation mechanisms that self-promotional marketing cannot replicate.

4.6. Theme 6: Platform-Specific Engagement Dynamics

The final theme captures participants' experiences of how platform affordances shape their relationship building with brands in distinctive ways. Rather than treating social media as undifferentiated space, Gen Z consumers navigate multiple platforms strategically, understanding that each offers different opportunities and constraints for brand interaction. They adjust expectations, behaviors, and relationship-building processes according to platform-specific dynamics.

Facebook emerged as the platform for depth and community. Participants valued Facebook's group functionality for facilitating sustained discussions, its algorithmic prioritization of followed pages in feeds, and its suitability for longer-form content and detailed exchanges. P28, a 21-year-old who actively uses Facebook groups, explained:

"Facebook is where I go for substance with brands. I'm in several brand community groups where we have real discussions—asking detailed questions, sharing experiences, solving problems together. Facebook's format supports this better than other platforms. Posts can be long, comment threads can develop over days, you can search old conversations. For brands I want deep relationships with, Facebook is essential. Other platforms are great for different things, but Facebook is for depth."

This description highlights how Facebook's affordances—groups, threaded discussions, search functionality, longer content formats—enable relationship depth and community formation that other platforms struggle to support. Participants used Facebook when seeking or sharing detailed

information, engaging in extended conversations, or participating in structured communities.

TikTok represented discovery, entertainment, and authenticity through unfiltered content. Participants valued TikTok's algorithm for exposing them to brands they wouldn't otherwise encounter, its short video format for showcasing products in entertaining ways, and its culture favoring raw, unedited content. P11, a 20-year-old heavy TikTok user, shared:

"TikTok is how I discover new brands. The algorithm is amazing at showing me things matching my interests that I didn't know existed. Brands on TikTok that succeed are usually fun and authentic—they make entertaining content, not just ads. I love seeing products in real use through short videos. It feels honest in a way that polished photos don't. If I find a brand I like on TikTok, I might follow them on other platforms too for different types of interaction. But TikTok is my discovery engine."

TikTok's distinctive affordances—powerful recommendation algorithm, short-form video, entertainment-first culture, trends and challenges—create unique opportunities for brand exposure and relationship initiation. Participants appreciated TikTok for introducing them to brands they'd otherwise never encounter (bridging capital) while the platform's authentic content norms aligned with their authenticity values.

Instagram served aesthetic expression, lifestyle aspiration, and visual storytelling. Participants valued Instagram's visual focus for appreciating brand aesthetics, its Stories feature for ephemeral behind-the-scenes content, and its influencer ecosystem for product discovery and validation. P04, a 19-year-old fashion-focused user, described:

"Instagram is where I engage with lifestyle and fashion brands. The visual platform lets brands tell their story through images and aesthetic. I love Instagram Stories for seeing behind-the-scenes content that feels more intimate than main feed posts. Instagram also lets me see how influencers and regular people style products in real life. It's inspirational and aspirational. For brands where visual identity matters, Instagram is perfect."

Instagram's affordances—image-centric format, Stories, influencer prominence, aesthetic curation—support relationship building for brands where visual identity, lifestyle associations, and aspirational positioning are central. Participants used Instagram for inspiration, aesthetic appreciation, and identity expression through brand associations.

Zalo occupied a unique position as Vietnam's dominant messaging platform with evolving commerce features. Participants valued Zalo for direct, private communication with brands, its integration with Vietnamese consumer habits, and its growing Official Account functionality. P05, a 27-year-old who regularly messages brands, explained:

"Zalo is interesting because it's primarily messaging, but brands are building presence there too. I use Zalo to message brands directly with questions or orders. It feels more personal than commenting publicly. Some brands have Official Accounts on Zalo where they share exclusive content or deals for followers. Because Zalo is so central to Vietnamese digital life—everyone uses it for personal messaging—it makes sense that commerce is happening there too. It's convenient having everything in one app."

Zalo's distinctive position in Vietnam—ubiquitous for messaging but evolving for commerce—creates unique dynamics. Its one-to-one communication affordance facilitates personalized interaction and relationship building distinct from public social platforms. Its cultural embeddedness makes it natural commerce extension.

Participants strategically allocated different aspects of brand relationships across platforms according to affordances. They might discover brands on TikTok, deepen understanding through Facebook groups, draw aesthetic inspiration from Instagram, and conduct transactions via Zalo. P10 and P15, mentioned earlier, articulated this multi-platform strategy:

"I use different platforms for different purposes with brands. TikTok is for discovery and entertainment. If I find something interesting, I check their Instagram for aesthetic and vibe."

If I'm seriously considering purchasing, I look for their Facebook community to see real customer experiences. Then I might message them on Zalo to ask specific questions or place orders. Each platform plays a role in my overall relationship with brands. The brands doing it best have presence across platforms and understand how to use each one appropriately."

This sophisticated multi-platform navigation demonstrates Gen Z's strategic approach to relationship building. Rather than random platform use, they consciously leverage different affordances for different relationship stages and functions. Successful brands must therefore develop platform-specific strategies while maintaining cohesive identity across platforms.

Platform-specific dynamics also influence the types of social capital built. Bridging capital—connections with diverse others—develops particularly well on TikTok through algorithm-driven discovery and on Facebook through large public groups. Bonding capital—deep connections within close communities—develops more on Facebook through intimate groups and on Zalo through direct messaging. Instagram serves both functions differently: bridging through influencer networks and discovery, bonding through close friends Stories and aesthetic communities.

Understanding these platform-specific dynamics is essential for comprehending how Gen Z builds online social capital with brands. Their experiences are not platform-agnostic but rather deeply shaped by the technical affordances, cultural norms, and interaction possibilities of each platform. Brands that successfully build social capital with Gen Z must understand and strategically leverage these platform-specific dynamics rather than deploying undifferentiated approaches across platforms.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Key Findings

This phenomenological study investigated how Vietnamese Gen Z consumers experience building online social capital with brands across social media platforms. Through in-depth interviews with 28 participants, we identified six interconnected themes capturing the essence of their experiences.

First, authenticity serves as the foundational prerequisite for any relationship development, with Gen Z consumers actively and continuously assessing whether brands present genuine identities. Second, participatory co-creation generates feelings of empowerment and ownership that transform consumers from targets into partners. Third, community belonging beyond transactions provides social identity and connection that makes purchases secondary consequences of community membership rather than primary goals. Fourth, transparency functions as ongoing evidence of trustworthiness through openness about practices, processes, and challenges. Fifth, peer networks continuously influence relationship formation through validation, observation, and recommendation mechanisms. Sixth, platform-specific affordances shape engagement dynamics, with Gen Z strategically leveraging different platforms for different relationship functions.

Together, these findings reveal that Gen Z constructs online social capital with brands through complex, multi-faceted processes fundamentally shaped by their digital nativity, generational values, and cultural context. They approach brand relationships as potentially meaningful social connections embedded in peer networks and community contexts, rather than purely transactional exchanges.

5.2. Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This research makes important theoretical contributions by extending Social Capital Theory to digital native generations in emerging markets, revealing novel mechanisms and processes overlooked in prior research. We developed a Gen Z-specific framework capturing how authenticity, co-creation, community, transparency, and peer networks interact to enable social capital construction. We demonstrated how cultural context shapes social capital dynamics, challenging implicit Western assumptions. We revealed platform specificity as constitutive of relationship building rather than merely contextual.

Practically, our findings offer actionable guidance for brands seeking authentic Gen Z engagement: prioritize authenticity over polish, facilitate systematic co-creation, invest in genuine community building, embrace radical transparency, leverage peer networks strategically, and develop platform-specific approaches. For platform designers and policymakers, we highlighted opportunities to better support meaningful brand-consumer relationships while protecting consumers in trust-deficient environments.

5.3. Limitations and Further research

This study's contributions must be considered alongside several important limitations that simultaneously point toward promising future research directions. First, our exclusive focus on Vietnamese Gen Z consumers limits generalizability across both geographic and generational boundaries. While our theoretical insights may transfer to other contexts, specific manifestations of online social capital construction likely vary substantially across cultural and economic environments. The collectivist orientation and emerging market characteristics of Vietnam may shape relationship patterns differently than individualist or developed market contexts. Future comparative research examining Gen Z experiences across diverse countries—particularly contrasting collectivist versus individualist cultures, emerging versus developed markets, and Asian versus Western contexts—would illuminate which patterns reflect generation-universal characteristics versus culturally specific manifestations. Additionally, comparative generational research examining whether Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers construct online social capital differently than Gen Z would clarify whether our findings reflect digital nativity or broader patterns that transcend generational boundaries.

Second, our cross-sectional design captured experiences at a single point in time, precluding examination of how brand relationships evolve and mature over extended periods. This snapshot approach cannot reveal developmental trajectories, identify critical moments or turning points, or distinguish factors predicting relationship longevity versus dissolution. Furthermore, the rapid evolution of social media platforms—with continuously modified affordances and algorithms—combined with Gen Z's ongoing life stage transitions means some findings may have limited temporal stability. Longitudinal research tracking individuals' relationship development with brands over time would address these limitations by revealing how initial discovery progresses through sustained engagement or eventual disengagement, how platform changes affect relationship dynamics, and how life stage transitions influence social capital construction patterns.

Third, relying exclusively on self-reported experiences through interviews introduces potential recall bias, social desirability effects, and limited self-awareness, as participants may not fully recognize or articulate all factors influencing their experiences. Moreover, our purposive sampling may have introduced selection bias, as participants volunteering for research about brand relationships might be more engaged or reflective than typical consumers. Mixed-methods research combining our qualitative insights with quantitative testing would strengthen understanding by assessing how widespread our identified themes are, testing whether proposed relationships hold statistically across large samples, and determining whether our framework predicts outcomes like purchase behavior or loyalty better than existing models. Complementary methods such as ethnographic observation of actual social media behaviors, analysis of digital trace data, or experimental designs testing causal relationships between specific experiences (authenticity perceptions, co-creation participation) and social capital formation could provide additional perspectives that overcome self-report limitations while reaching more representative samples.

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