



# *Crafting Narratives for the Next Generation:*

*A qualitative and strategic analysis of how storytelling can  
be leveraged as a powerful strategic tool to effectively  
engage with Generation Z*

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## **Abstract**

Storytelling is a powerful branding tool, helping companies connect with target groups. As Generation Z's economic influence grows, brands face increasing pressure to meet their expectations for authenticity, values, and interaction, presenting both challenges and opportunities. This thesis explores storytelling as a tool to connect with this audience, supported by a literature review and qualitative research highlighting the need for innovative, tailored approaches.

The analysis highlights the need to avoid superficial or inauthentic portrayals, which risk alienating Generation Z or triggering backlash when their values are misused. Narrative elements like characters and plotlines are particularly effective in engaging this demographic. The research highlights a shift in storytelling where Generation Z not only consumes brand narratives but also actively shapes them. This is seen in their feedback, their involvement in creating brand stories, and their use of social media to amplify or critique messages. User-generated content and influencer marketing further demonstrate how Generation Z influences brand storytelling in real-time. The study concludes that successfully engaging this audience requires adapting storytelling to their preferences while encouraging their active involvement in shaping narratives.

**Keywords:** Storytelling; Branding; Brand Storytelling; Generation Z; Narratives; Digital Storytelling Trends

**Title:** Crafting Narratives for the Next Generation: A qualitative and strategic analysis of how storytelling can be leveraged as a powerful strategic tool to effectively engage with Generation Z

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## **Sumário**

A narração de histórias é uma poderosa ferramenta de branding, que ajuda as empresas a ligarem-se a grupos-alvo. À medida que a influência económica da Geração Z cresce, as marcas enfrentam uma pressão cada vez maior para satisfazer as suas expectativas de autenticidade, valores e interação, o que representa desafios e oportunidades. Esta tese explora a narração de histórias como uma ferramenta para estabelecer uma ligação com este público, apoiada por uma revisão da literatura e uma investigação qualitativa que salienta a necessidade de abordagens inovadoras e adaptadas.

A análise salienta a necessidade de evitar representações superficiais ou inautênticas, que correm o risco de alienar a Geração Z ou de provocar reacções adversas quando os seus valores são mal utilizados. Elementos narrativos como personagens e enredos são particularmente eficazes para envolver este grupo demográfico. A investigação destaca uma mudança no modo de contar histórias em que a Geração Z não só consome as narrativas das marcas, como também as molda ativamente. Isto é visível no seu feedback, no seu envolvimento na criação de histórias de marcas e na sua utilização das redes sociais para amplificar ou criticar mensagens. O conteúdo gerado pelo utilizador e o marketing de influência demonstram ainda como a Geração Z influencia a narrativa da marca em tempo real. O estudo conclui que, para envolver com sucesso este público, é necessário adaptar a narração às suas preferências e, ao mesmo tempo, encorajar o seu envolvimento ativo na criação de narrativas.

**Palavras-chave:** Storytelling; Branding; Brand Storytelling; Geração Z; Narrativas;

Tendências de Storytelling Digital

**Título:** Crafting Narratives for the Next Generation: Uma análise qualitativa e estratégica da forma como a narração de histórias pode ser aproveitada como uma poderosa ferramenta estratégica para interagir eficazmente com a Geração Z

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## **Index of Abbreviations**

AD = Advertisement

AI = Artificial Intelligence

CBB-Model = Customer-Based Brand Equity Model

COVID-19 = Coronavirus Disease 2019

GenZ = Generation Z

OC = Overarching Category

SC = Subordinate Category

UGC= user-generated content

## **1. Introduction**

Stories have accompanied mankind since time immemorial. (Zhang et al. 2023) Whether as a bedtime story in childhood or a tale by the campfire, stories captivate, resonate, and leave lasting impressions. (Fordon 2018) Yet, do all generations find them equally engaging, or do reactions vary across age groups? Today, storytelling has evolved to encompass a broader significance, extending beyond its traditional role as a private narrative form into the business domains. (Moreno et al. 2023) Companies use it specifically as a brand communication tool to convey their values, build an emotional bond with their customers and strengthen their brand identity. (Feng et al. 2024)

One approach is to focus on a specific consumer group, such as Generation Z, who not only possess growing purchasing power but also reshape standards for brands and their communication strategies. (Lurtz and Thieme 2023; Explainers 2023)

### **1.1 Background and Problem Statement**

This chapter outlines the background and problem that highlights the need to examine the topics of storytelling and Generation Z in greater depth. As previously mentioned and later elaborated, storytelling has evolved from a traditional advertising method into a strategic tool that enables companies to convey their messages not only informatively but also emotionally and authentically. This approach helps businesses stand out in a competitive market. (Zhang et al. 2023) The challenge becomes particularly significant when addressing Generation Z, born between the 1990s and early 2010s, a generation characterized by a deep understanding of digital technologies and media. The following sections will discuss key factors that illustrate the unique challenges of engaging this generation, which will be further detailed later. (Dolot 2018)

Generation Z has grown up entirely in a digital environment, making them accustomed to content that is accessible, visually engaging, and easy to understand. Their fragmented media usage and shorter attention spans challenge brands to convey messages quickly and effectively across multiple channels. To gain their trust, brands must not only understand their digital habits but also communicate authentically and transparently, while aligning with their humor, language, and cultural as well as social values. (Livadic 2018; PrakashYadav and Rai 2017) Moreover, there is still no clear framework for brands on how to craft stories tailored specifically to this consumer group, adding to the complexity of engaging them effectively.

These factors highlight the need to adapt storytelling strategies to meet the specific expectations of Generation Z. This thesis aims to explore how storytelling can serve as a strategic tool, which narrative types resonate most with this generation, and whether traditional storytelling is being redefined by their influence.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

This research initially deals with the instrument of storytelling itself. In this regard, the discussion will focus on how the instrument can be used as a marketing tool, which elements need to be taken into account, and which prerequisites must be met for the instrument to prove itself as a tool in the aforementioned context. Furthermore, the development of storytelling will be analysed and Generation Z will be examined. As part of this, a special focus is placed on exploring the values that occupy this generation, as well as analysing the relevance of this generation from an economic perspective. The two terms are then combined to form the central research object of this thesis in order to determine the extent to which the two terms already interact and whether storytelling can already be presented as an effective tool for this generation. If such a need arises, the present study is dedicated to the question of the extent to which an adaptation of the storytelling tool is necessary in order to successfully address the generation in question.

The following research question can be derived from the research object described:

*“To what extent does the marketing tool of brand storytelling need to be adapted in order to effectively address Generation Z and win them as a target group in the long term?”*

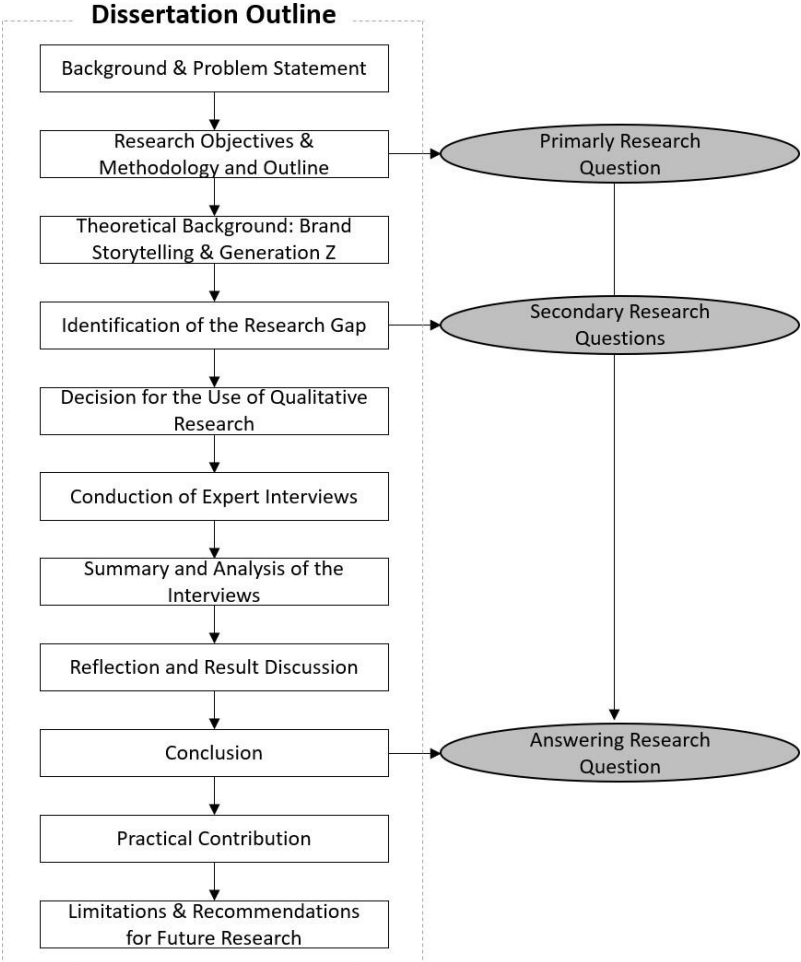
The research question serves to systematically investigate the extent to which the marketing tool of brand storytelling must be adapted.

## 1.3 Methodology and Outline

To achieve the objectives of this dissertation, the study begins with a comprehensive literature review, forming the basis for the empirical analysis in Chapter Two. This review defines key terms and provides overview of existing research. Peer-reviewed articles were systematically selected and analyzed to ensure a solid theoretical foundation and methodological rigor, focusing on the keywords: *storytelling*, *brand storytelling*, *Generation Z*, *strategies targeting Generation Z*, and *brand strategy*.

The literature review is followed by an empirical study that builds upon the theoretical framework and contributes original insights to address the research question. The following figure visually conceptualizes the approach of the thesis.

Figure 1: Framework for Research



Source: Own illustration

A qualitative research methodology will be employed, utilizing expert interviews as the primary method of data collection. The rationale for selecting this approach, along with its methodological underpinnings, is outlined comprehensively in Chapter Three. The data obtained from the expert interviews is systematically analyzed and contextualized within the existing body of literature. The final chapter synthesizes the key findings, providing a conclusive response to the research question.

This study focuses primarily on the German representation of Generation Z, both in the literature review and empirical analysis. This geographical scope is deliberate, as the interviews were conducted exclusively in German, and the relevant literature on political views and sociocultural events reflects this regional focus. This thematic delimitation ensures a precise and contextually grounded analysis, enabling the research to concentrate on a clearly defined and academically robust framework.

## 2. Literature Review

This chapter lays the theoretical and conceptual foundations for the study, focusing on defining storytelling and Generation Z to ensure clarity and coherence in the analysis.

### 2.1 Introduction to Storytelling

Storytelling goes beyond conveying information, using structured content to evoke emotions, convey meaning, and build a deeper connection with the audience. (Hong et al. 2022) Rather, it uses narrative techniques and elements to create an emotional connection between the storyteller and the listener. (van Laer et al. 2014) The aim of storytelling is to achieve more than simply passing on a message; it should have a lasting effect on the other person and anchor what they have heard in their memory. (Polletta et al. 2011)

One of the oldest and most fundamental forms of communication known to humanity is the art of storytelling. (Woodside et al. 2008; Hopkins 2015) Even in the Stone Age, people used stories to pass on vital information, preserve experiences and knowledge and connect with their community. (Fog et al. 2010) Stories have always served as a medium for the transmission of cultural values, myths and beliefs, while also acting as a survival mechanism that enabled people to preserve and pass on knowledge and experience in a sustainable way. (Quiñones 2022) In ancient societies, such as in Mesopotamia and Greece, myths and epics such as the Gilgamesh Epic or “Odyssey” played a central role. (Mills 2024) These tales created collective identities, explained natural phenomena and served as moral guidance. (Moin 2020)

In academic literature, there exists a lack of consensus regarding the term “story” and “narrative”, with some scholars using them interchangeably, while others offer distinct definitions for each. In this research, however, both terms are treated as synonymous in order to ensure consistency. (Polletta et al. 2011) Irrespective of the specific terminology employed, it is evident that storytelling operates through a range of psychological mechanisms that exert a significant influence on memory and emotional engagement. Empirical studies demonstrate that stories elicit pronounced neural responses, as human memory exhibits a heightened ability to retain information that is both structurally organized and emotionally enriched. (Hilke Plassmann et al. 2012) Different memory systems, including procedural, semantic, and episodic memory, collaborate to store stories in a coherent sequence, thereby facilitating their retrieval. (Bettman 1979; Tulving 1985) Episodic memory in particular anchors information especially

well when it is embedded in stories, as this creates memory anchors that make the content more memorable. (Woodside 2010; Singh and Sonnenburg 2012)

The art of storytelling also affects hormonal processes in the brain, further enhancing its effectiveness. (Moin 2020) This is because Storytelling triggers dopamine for happiness, cortisol for alertness, endorphins for well-being, and oxytocin, the “bonding hormone”, to foster trust and empathy. (Garmston 2018; Libermann 2013)

The principle of identification in storytelling evokes strong emotions by allowing listeners to connect with characters and their challenges. As the brain often perceives narrated experiences as real, this connection triggers genuine emotional reactions. (Chatmann 1978; Jacobs 2002)

Drawing on a thorough examination of contemporary literature, the primary functions of storytelling can be categorized into four core areas. The most original and universal function is entertainment. (Abdul Mutalib et al. 2011) Stories often serve as an escape from everyday life and evoke a wide range of emotions in the audience, such as joy, excitement, or compassion. (Kirchner and Wayne 1994) Secondly, they serve to impart knowledge by simplifying the transfer of information and experience, making it easier to understand and remember, as demonstrated through the humorous process. (Wallace 2000) Storytelling also serves to convey values, as stories often convey social values and norms. Traditionally, these values can be found in fairy tales and fables, which illustrate what is considered right or wrong in society. (Moin 2020) In addition, storytelling has an identity-forming function. It helps people to strengthen their own identity and sense of belonging. (Selvi et al. 2022) National myths, family traditions and personal stories contribute to identity formation by reflecting and giving meaning to the self-image and origins of a person or community. (Moonga 2022)

These functions have manifested themselves in various forms throughout history. Traditional forms encompass oral narratives, which represent one of the oldest methods of transmitting stories through spoken word. (Moonga 2022) The invention of writing made it possible to spread complex stories over long distances. Literature as a form of written storytelling makes it possible to develop in-depth storylines and create complex characters. (Jackson 2009)

Modern media have reshaped storytelling, enabling brands to strategically build emotional connections and engage consumers, as further explored in the next chapter. (Tabassum et al. 2020)

## 2.2 Brand Storytelling: Fundamentals and Significance

The targeted use of narrative elements aims to create an emotional and lasting connection between a brand and its audience, a concept known as brand storytelling. (Escalas 2004) The term “brand” goes far beyond a simple logo or symbol; it represents the sum of all perceptions and expectations that consumers and the public associate with a company, its products and services. Brands act as identity carriers by embodying certain values and characteristics that consumers link with specific associations and emotions. (Kotler 1999) From this it can be concluded that a strong brand creates associations that foster trust and build an emotional bond.

A detailed examination of brand equity from the customer’s perspective can be effectively framed using the brand equity model, commonly referred to as Keller’s Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model. The following figure presents an overview of its key components.

*Figure 2: CBBE Model*



*Source: (Keller 2001)*

Keller’s CBBE model provides a framework for defining a brand from the customer’s perspective, outlining four stages of brand development. The process begins with building brand awareness to ensure recognition and understanding, followed by creating meaning through the communication of functional benefits and emotional values. Positive responses are then fostered by encouraging favorable evaluations and emotional connections, culminating in brand resonance, which establishes a strong, lasting customer bond. Each stage is associated

with specific goals, progressing from awareness to loyalty, illustrated through the model's hierarchical pyramid structure. (Keller 2001)

When considering brand storytelling in the context of the CBBE model, the instrument can be seen as a tool that supports each stage of the model. For example, the storytelling tool can be used to emphasize the performance and image of the brand by linking the functional benefits of a product with emotional associations. (Huang 2010) It enhances brand performance and imagery by linking functional benefits to emotional associations, appealing to both rational and emotional levels. The integration of storytelling demonstrates its effectiveness in influencing the entire brand-building process, from awareness to loyalty. (Aimé 2023)

To comprehensively grasp the distinctiveness and significance of brand storytelling, it is essential to elucidate the key differences that distinguish it from general storytelling. (Fog et al. 2010) Brand storytelling uses targeted narrative techniques to create a meaningful connection between a brand and its audience. (Fog et al. 2010; Straker and Wrigley 2016) Unlike general storytelling, which focuses on entertainment or knowledge transfer, brand storytelling has strategic goals. It seeks to enhance brand awareness, reinforce identity, and convey values and personality through compelling narratives. (Herskovitz and Crystal 2010) A key difference is the narrative structure and control. General storytelling is dynamic and open, while brand storytelling is a controlled communication tool conveying the brand's identity and message. (Chen and Seng 2016) The audience's role also differs, with classic storytelling involving passive consumption, while brand storytelling actively adapts to the preferences and interpretations of the target group. (Aimé 2023)

Understanding the key elements of brand storytelling is crucial before creating an effective brand narrative, as explored in the next chapter.

### 2.2.1 Fundamental Components of Brand Storytelling

Understanding the distinctiveness of brand storytelling requires analyzing its key elements. This chapter highlights their importance and role in brand communication. Based on the literature, character, plot, conflict and emotional resonance are identified as essential components of effective brand storytelling. (Fog et al. 2010; Polletta et al. 2011) Through the targeted and consistent application of these elements, brands can tell an authentic and convincing story. (Dominique-Ferreira et al. 2022)

As a first aspect, characters are central in brand storytelling, embodying the brand and reflecting its identity, values, and personality. (Chestek 2007) The authenticity of the characters is crucial as it influences the degree of identification of the target group. (Cinelli and LeBoeuf 2020) These characters, often archetypes like heroes, mentors, or rebels, may appear as founders, ambassadors, or symbolic figures. (Mark and Pearson 2001; Vogler 2007; Campbell 1949) These archetypes are deeply rooted in human experiences and cultural narratives, which evokes an emotional resonance and creates a strong connection between brand and consumer. (Mark and Pearson 2001; Jung 1959)

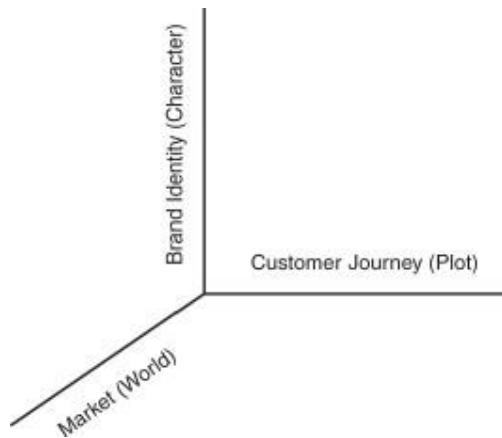
Another important element is the plot or storyline of a brand story, which structures the development and progression of the narrative. (McKee 1997) It outlines the chronological sequence, beginning with an introduction, followed by a climax, and concluding with a resolution. (Campbell 1949) This structure ensures story coherence and keeps the target audience engaged. Brand storytelling often employs classic plots like overcoming challenges, personal transformation, or addressing social issues. (McKeen and Greace 2018) Equally important is the role of conflicts, which create tension and subtly convey brand values. These can involve social challenges like sustainability vs. profitability. (Pereira 2019) Krevolin adds to this perspective by defining a story as a narrative in which a charismatic character has to overcome major obstacles to achieve a certain goal. (Krevolin 2016)

An essential point conveyed through the characters, storyline, or message is the evocation of emotions. These emotional anchors strengthen the connection between the brand and its audience by eliciting feelings like joy or trust, thereby influencing brand loyalty and purchasing decisions. (Escalas 2004; Mark and Pearson 2001)

The previously defined elements of storytelling should not be considered in isolation, but in their interaction in order to create a coherent narrative. Miller's (2017) StoryBrand model offers an approach in which the customer is portrayed as the hero and the brand as the supporting character. (Miller 2017) While this approach emphasises the customer journey, it ignores the brand as an active, authentic character.

Pereira criticises this one-sidedness and instead proposes a holistic model that integrates the three dimensions - brand identity (character), customer journey (action) and market environment (world).

*Figure 3: The Three-Dimensions of Story*



*Source: (Pereira 2019)*

This framework makes it clear that brands must be more than mere supporters of the customer journey. They should radiate a clear identity and authenticity, as brand identity is the aspect that companies can control directly. Through brand identity, they define how they want to be perceived, what values they communicate and how they present their uniqueness. (Pereira 2019) These fundamentals form the basis for the transition to the next chapter, which takes a closer look at how this element are created for advertisement.

### 2.2.3 Storytelling in Advertising

Advertising is typically regarded as a technique that integrates information and persuasion to strategically influence the opinions and behaviour of the target audience. When employed within the framework of storytelling, it evolves into a medium for conveying a narrative in an advertising format, utilising storytelling elements to foster conviction for the brand. (Park and Lee 2014)

Unlike traditional advertising, which primarily aims to inform, brand storytelling emphasizes creating an emotional connection with the audience. Stern (1994) differentiates between “classic advertising dramas” and “vignette dramas”. (Stern 1994) Classic advertising dramas are characterized by a continuous plot in which the relationships between the characters are developed and deepened. (Stern 1994) Vignette dramas present independent, visually striking

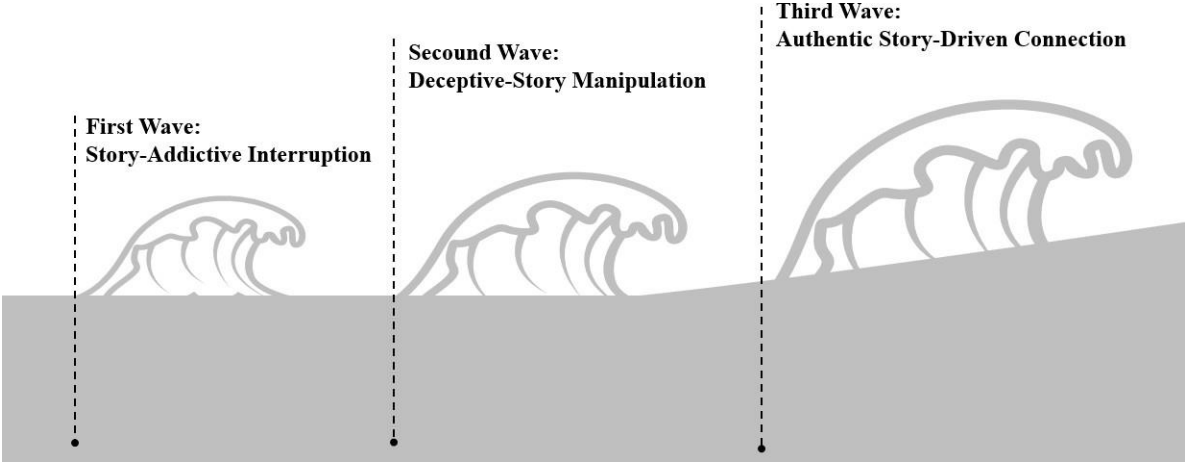
scenes out of sequence, concisely conveying characters’ desires and emotions. (Stern 1994; Wells 1989) In modern campaigns, advertising serves as a platform that conveys the brand’s stories. This is done through various media forms such as print, television and radio as well as digital channels such as social media, websites and video portals. (Amangeldiyeva et al. 2022) When considering the nature of advertising, it is increasingly being used as a multimodal medium that integrates formats such as videos, graphics, text, and sound, creating an immersive and holistic experience. (Mohamed et al. 2024) This approach enables the presentation of complex stories in a visually and emotionally engaging manner within a short timeframe, enhancing brand recall and audience impact. (Mohamed et al. 2024)

The following chapter explores the evolution of storytelling in advertising, a key focus for this research. Because it is required to establish where storytelling currently stands and highlights potential trends that may shape its future development.

2.2.2 Emerging Trends and Developments in Storytelling

An examination of the evolution of brand storytelling, as classified by Moin (2020), organizes its development into distinct waves, each reflecting significant shifts in the way stories are used in marketing. This framework underscores the transition from a predominantly advertising-centered approach to a more authentic, audience-focused method of storytelling. To aid reader clarity, the three waves described are visually represented in an accompanying figure. While Moin did not create an illustration, this depiction organizes his framework into a accessible format. (Moin 2020)

Figure 4: Evolution of Brand Storytelling Waves



Source: Own illustration based on the conceptual framework described by Moin (2020)

The first wave, “Story-Addictive Interruption”, represents the integration of storytelling into marketing through disruptive advertising. (Moin 2020) Newspapers began incorporating corporate messaging into social and political stories in the 18th century, marking the beginning of modern storytelling. (Arvidsson 2019) With the introduction of radio and television, the format of the commercial gained increasing importance, as it focused on short, brand-related narratives that were often perceived as intrusive and disruptive. (McKeen and Greace 2018) These shifts pushed companies to adopt more subtle and coherent strategies to convey their messages. (Jiwa 2014)

Brands connected marketing to feelings like pleasure and suffering during the second wave, known as “Deceptive-Story Manipulation”. (Moin 2020) More rhetorical approaches were used in rational marketing strategies, which emphasized the advantages of their products while frequently downplaying the advantages of rivals. This approach sought to influence consumer decisions by appealing to both logic and emotion. (McKeen and Greace 2018) However, the internet and ad-blockers reduced the impact and credibility of traditional ads, leading to growing consumer skepticism and a demand for more authentic approaches. (Dinana 2022) As consumers grew more skeptical of manipulative advertising, the demand for a more genuine approach emerged. (Moin 2020)

This shift laid the foundation for the third wave, “*Authentic Story-Driven Connection*”, which is characterized by a focus on transparent and sincere communication. (Moin 2020) According to Moin, the focus of this current wave is on using genuine storytelling to create enduring relationships with customers. (Moin 2020) The emphasis switches from using deceptive tactics to building loyalty and trust in order to create a stronger and longer-lasting relationship with the audience. (Walter and Gioglio 2018) Moin emphasizes the value of sincere communication in building enduring loyalty, pointing out that tales made by customers can have a deeper emotional impact than those produced by brands. Rather than portraying itself as the protagonist, the brand takes on the role of mentor or advisor, helping clients deal with their everyday struggles. (Moin 2020)

This section analyzes contemporary storytelling trends, focusing on how brands adapt their narratives to align with current audience requirements and emerging trends. A crucial element is the active involvement of consumers in brand communication, enabling them to contribute their experiences to the brand narrative. (Dominique-Ferreira et al. 2022)

According to Rohith et al. (2024), social media may help brands to tell relevant stories by highlighting the people who make their goods, which in turn encourages active involvement. (Rohith et al. 2024) One way to elevate storytelling to a more interactive and personalized level, thereby fostering active engagement on these platforms, as described by Rohith et al. (2024), is the use of user-generated content (UGC). UGC refers to content created by users themselves, where they share stories about a company or its products. (Hennig et al. 2017) According to Henning (2017), this strategy greatly increases the message's impact and authenticity by turning consumers into brand ambassadors and storytellers. Through narrative, this relationship strengthens the audience's bond with the brand and builds trust between the audience and the content providers. (Hennig et al. 2017) The advantages of UGC for storytelling and brands include higher engagement, cost-effectiveness compared to professional ads, and faster, more relatable connections with audiences. Additionally, UGC spreads swiftly, increasing its effect and reach. (Gabelaia and McElroy 2024)

A significant trend is the growing focus on sustainability and social values in brand storytelling. Consumers increasingly prefer brands that show commitment to sustainability and positive social impact, viewing them as responsible actors balancing commercial goals with a dedication to the greater good. (Rohith et al. 2024)

In conclusion, this chapter addresses the research question by examining the evolution and trends in brand storytelling that shape narrative expectations. It shows how marketing strategies have adapted to changes in market conditions and consumer expectations.

### 2.3 Target Audience: Who Are the Consumers of These Stories?

Effective storytelling requires a story to be received and understood by the audience, not just communicated. To ensure their messages resonate in the right environment, brands must precisely identify and segment their target audience. (Fina 2016) A crucial element in the success of brand storytelling is the capacity to identify the appropriate customers. (Kleinjohann and Reinecke 2020) Different classification criteria can be used to determine a company's target group. These consist of behavioral, psychographic, geographic, and sociodemographic traits. (Kleinjohann and Reinecke 2020; Fuchs and Unger 2014; Heun 2017) Accurate target group identification is essential for optimal resource allocation, tailored strategies, and successful channel and message alignment. (Bruhn 2019; Fuchs and Unger 2014) The term "target group" is criticized by Fordon (2018) for encouraging dogmatic thinking. In order to employ

storytelling as a genuine and open communication method more successfully, he stresses concentrating on historical and social triggers. (Fordon 2018) One method is to adopt the generational approach, offering a structured framework for analyzing shared characteristics and values within a cohort. In this context, Generation Z was defined as the target group in this dissertation, as stated in the introduction, with the underlying concept based on this approach.

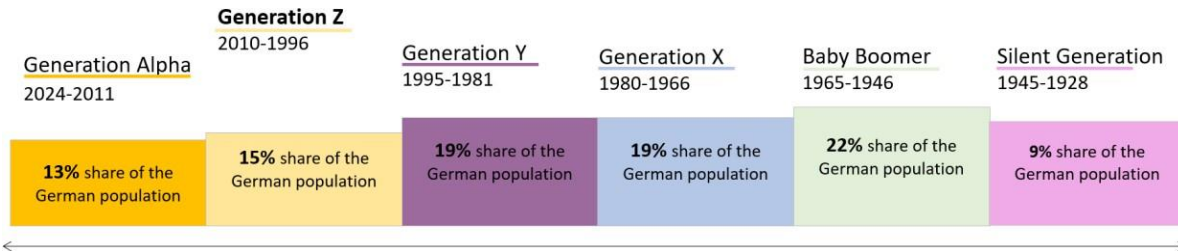
#### 2.4 Definition of Generation Z

Colloquially, the term “generation” refers to the division of people into groups based on their year of birth. (Klein 2020) However, in sociology, a generation is the entirety of individuals of a similar age who have a same social orientation and life philosophy. (Bristow 2024) This suggests that a person’s early years and the particular circumstances of their upbringing are the foundation of a common perspective on life. (Bristow 2024) According to the generational concept of Howe and Strauss, there are 19 generations, starting with the first generation (1588-1617), the Puritans, up to today’s generations. (Howe and Strauss 1992) In the modern world, five generations in particular are clearly known and widely used in the literature. (Howe and Strauss 1992; Cilliers 2017) The term “generation” refers to a group of people who grow up during the same period and, as a result, are shaped by similar conditions and influences, particularly during their formative years. (Parry and Urwin 2011) This shared upbringing occurs in similar historical, cultural, economic, and social contexts, where significant events and technological developments have a lasting effect. As a result, individuals within a generation often display comparable actions, viewpoints, and attitudes toward life. (Dolot 2018; Sidorcuka and Chesnovicka 2017) Nonetheless, the idea of a “generational gap” draws attention to the variations that might occur between generations, frequently with regard to attitudes, work ethics, conduct, and learning styles. (PrakashYadav and Rai 2017)

The importance of this study question is shown by the fact that Generation Z has emerged as a key focus for marketing professionals and scholars. (PrakashYadav and Rai 2017) Although the precise birth years can vary significantly throughout sources, this paper defines Generation Z as those born between 1996 and 2010. (Explainers 2023)

This can be further illustrated in the following figure, which also highlights the distribution of this generation in Germany.

Figure 5: Demographics Distribution by Generations in Germany



Source: Own illustration, Data: (Statista Research Department 2024; OC&C Strategy 2019)

Therefore, this generation comes after Generation Y, often known as the Millennials, and before Generation Alpha, which is still in school and will have its members by 2025. (Dolot 2018) These terms, such as “Gen Z,” “Zoomers,” “digital natives,” and “iGeneration” were assigned to the generation based on their characteristic traits and experiences. (Selvi et al. 2022)

With this in mind, the defining years of Generation Z are analysed using a PESTEL framework, with relevant literature added for a comprehensive picture.

Generation Z grew up in **political** uncertainty, marked by events like the 2015 refugee crisis, financial crises (e.g., Greece, the U.S. housing bubble), Brexit, European military conflicts, and the Trump era, alongside rising polarization in the EU. (OC&C Strategy 2019) In many parts of Europe, especially Germany, Generation Z has seen relative economic stability, with consistent purchasing power in spite of price increases. Consumer behavior has significantly changed toward online shopping as a result of globalization and the expansion of e-commerce. (OC&C Strategy 2019) Social movements like “MeToo” (2017) and “Black Lives Matter” (2013, intensified in 2020) have shaped Generation Z’s focus on gender equality, social justice, and anti-racism. Social media has amplified peer interaction, opinion-sharing, and influencer-driven content. (OC&C Strategy 2019) In terms of **technology**, Generation Z is the first generation to grow up entirely digital, which has also earned them the name “digital natives”. (OC&C Strategy 2019; Klein 2020) Since the introduction of Wi-Fi in 1999, telephone and data flat rates from 2005, this generation has grown up with technology and has learned to use it as a matter of course from the outset. Generation Z has seamlessly integrated technology into their lives, with platforms like TikTok (2016), Facebook (2004), and Netflix (1997) playing a

central role in daily life and advertising. (OC&C Strategy 2019; Twenge 2017) Ecologically, the generation is shaped by climate change, with movements like “Fridays for Future” fostering a strong focus on sustainability and resource-conscious consumption. (Wehrden et al. 2019) In legal terms, Data protection and cybersecurity are becoming more important in the digital age. The COVID-19 (2020) pandemic profoundly impacted their education and social lives, shifting many activities to the digital space due to legal restrictions. (Harari et al. 2022) In conclusion, significant events have shaped the beliefs and actions of Generation Z. The resulting qualities are explored in the following section.

#### 2.4.1 Characteristics and Core Values

Generation Z’s most distinctive feature can be linked to the digitization of their period. Since they were raised as “digital natives”, they have a natural grasp of digital tools and platforms and frequently utilize them for communication, entertainment, and information gathering. (Fordon 2018) This generation is able to keep several digital friendships in addition to their physical ones, all while being accessible at any time and from any location thanks to the networked world. (Twenge 2017; Dolot 2018) Furthermore, they are skilled at confirming sources and using digital tools and research to solve problems. Constant access to information has made Generation Z critically minded and independent, adept at verifying sources and solving problems through research and digital possibilities. (Grigoreva et al. 2021)

With digital tools and continual access to information, Generation Z has been able to overcome linguistic hurdles and thrive in global settings thanks to globalization and technology. (Scholz 2019) This characterizes Generation Z as politically and socially active, appreciating diversity, social justice, environmental consciousness, and inclusivity, all of which are supported by movements such as Black Lives Matter and Fridays for Future. (Lurtz and Thieme 2023)

It should be noted, that one of the main characteristics of Generation Z is their quest for originality, which is frequently exhibited on social media and through brands. (Livadic 2018) Thus, brands that provide individualized experiences are very appealing. However, this generation places a high value on authenticity and openness. (Fuchs and Unger 2014) Due to their media literacy and ability to quickly recognize edited images and filtered content, they are looking for authentic, unembellished representations and want to identify with people they follow online. This yearning for authenticity has given rise to movements such as “BeReal”,

where social media is used to show an unadulterated picture of everyday life. Platforms and Apps and platforms that satisfy these needs of Generation Z are very popular. (Fordon 2018; Tirocchi 2023)

Considering the values and characteristics of Generation Z, key themes for brand storytelling, such as authenticity, individuality, and social responsibility, emerge. These aspects, drawn from the literature, will also be explored in the interviews to assess their relevance to brand storytelling.

#### 2.4.2 Market Relevance and Economic Significance of Generation Z

It is evident by examining Generation Z's market relevance and economic significance that they are not only distinctive given their proportion of the world's population, but also the largest and richest generation. Their economic influence is expanding twice as quickly as that of preceding generations, with a projected population of nearly 2 billion and an annual growth rate of 4.02% in consumer spending. By 2030, Generation Z is expected to contribute USD 12.6 trillion, or 17.1% of global consumption, to the economy. To put this into context, Generation Z will be responsible for one out of every five transactions made worldwide by 2030. (Bowles and Fengler 2024)

In addition to having a sizable market, Generation Z also has a lot of influence, especially when it comes to Cancel Culture. This practice entails publicly denouncing and boycotting firms over acts or words that are judged inappropriate or provocative. Their usage of social media sites like Instagram and TikTok to spread their beliefs and ideals is a clear indication of this effect. (Watt 2023) Through these digital networks, Generation Z has been able to collectively influence the brand world and publicly criticize unrealistic ideals of beauty and lack of diversity. (Kleinjohann and Reinecke 2020)

Furthermore, Generation Z plays a crucial role in shaping purchasing decisions by impacting their immediate social environment, including family and friends, as well as influencing other customers through digital platforms. (OC&C Strategy 2019)

#### 2.4.3 Media Use and Consumer Behavior of Generation Z

Considering the impact of digital platforms, they play a significant role in shaping Generation Z's purchasing decisions. They like fast pricing comparisons and reviews and rely on the

internet for e-commerce and product research. For online purchasing to be successful, speed, functionality, and a smooth user experience are essential. (Moreno et al. 2023) Because inconsistencies run the danger of making organizations seem antiquated or untrustworthy, Generation Z needs a smooth omnichannel presence with consistent messaging. (Livadic 2018; Fuchs and Unger 2014)

In Germany in 2023, Generation Z will spend an average of 4 hours and 45 minutes a day on their cellphones, which they rely on extensively for social media, information, and communication. (Künzler 2023) Social media accounts for more than half of this time, with the most widely used sites being Instagram and TikTok. (Künzler 2023) On social media, Generation Z is heavily influenced by influencers, whose opinions, targeted product recommendations, and endorsements shape their purchasing decisions. (Fuchs and Unger 2014)

Especially Generation Z, who prefer videos over pictures and short, full-screen material, visual communication is essential. Brands can interact with them across many channels simultaneously because to their “second screen” behaviors, such as using smartphones while watching TV. (Livadic 2018) However, this behavior also comes with challenges: the average attention span of Generation Z is only around eight seconds, which represents a four-second drop compared to the previous generation. Due to this, marketers find it extremely challenging to communicate their message succinctly and precisely, especially when narrating intricate stories. Therefore, in order to get their attention, brands need to make their material clear and eye-catching. (Moreno et al. 2023)

## 2.5 Generation Z and Storytelling: A Research Gap

This section incorporates the terms storytelling and Generation Z, building on the theoretical framework developed in the preceding chapter, which offered a shared grasp of important concepts and the research framework.

The results from the preceding chapter are considered and summed up, and these terms are categorized according to the present status of research. The following analyzes and looks at the two terms’ relationship in respect to the study issue. Finding any research gaps and assessing the theoretical accomplishments and current discoveries in the literature are the goals.

Recent studies have indicated that the use of storytelling in marketing is an effective strategy, particularly when targeting Generation Z. Feng's research indicates that storytelling works effectively for capturing the attention of Generation Z, who value real stories and strong brand bonds. Sincere messaging and gripping plots have a significant impact on their purchase decisions, which makes storytelling a better option than traditional sales techniques. (Feng et al. 2024) Moreno supports this perspective, emphasizing the appeal of emotionally resonant storytelling while noting the challenge posed by Generation Z's shorter attention spans. (Moreno et al. 2023) Zhang's study adds a forward-looking dimension, identifying emerging shifts in storytelling influenced by Generation Z. Key insights include the preference for themes rooted in daily life or social issues, the importance of evoking sympathy, and the value of aligning with modern trends. Zhang also emphasizes how storytelling can be used as a marketing tool to personify brand attributes and strengthen brand identification through engaging, meaningful interactions. (Zhang et al. 2023)

It can be inferred from the existing literature that brand storytelling is a powerful technique for interacting with Generation Z. However, the issue of how companies might use narrative components and storytelling strategies to effectively engage Generation Z is yet unanswered. More research is needed on topics including the particular components and the degree to which this generation shapes storytelling conventions. The following research questions are raised in an effort to fill in these information gaps:

1. Which narrative elements and storytelling techniques are particularly suitable for building long-term emotional connections with Generation Z?
2. What types of content/ brand message does Generation Z prefer to engage with in brand storytelling?
3. How does Generation Z influence the storytelling of brands and their communication strategies through their preferences and interactivity?

As stated in the introduction, this dissertation's goal is to close the current gap by determining and evaluating the necessary techniques for successful storytelling that is suited to Generation Z. In the following chapters, a qualitative study is carried out in order to achieve this research goal.

### **3. Methodology**

The next section details the qualitative data collection process, focusing on expert interviews to explore Generation Z's expectations for brand storytelling.

#### **3.1 Qualitative Research and Data Collection**

To address the research question and validate the theoretical assumptions about storytelling and Generation Z, the following chapter conducts empirical social research using qualitative data to confirm or refute the assumption. Additionally, it explores further adaptations of storytelling by answering the secondary research questions, thereby contributing to the resolution of the primary research question and narrowing the identified gap. (Helfferrich 2019) Empirical social research makes a fundamental distinction between quantitative and qualitative survey methods. (Raithel 2008) For this dissertation, a qualitative approach was chosen, involving interviews with experts and Generation Z representatives, which classifies the data collection as expert statements. This method allows for a more nuanced knowledge of the subject by examining conversations for recurrent patterns, which offers deeper insights into interviewees' experiences and viewpoints. (Bogner et al. 2014) The choice of research method is based on the realization that storytelling, shaped by subjective perceptions and emotions, particularly benefits from a qualitative approach in order to capture the expectations and behaviors of Generation Z in detail. (Bogner et al. 2014; Baxter and Jack 2008)

In order to handle the intricacy of the subject, semi-structured interviews were specifically chosen as the survey instrument. (Liebold and Trinczek 2009) This approach allows for guided yet flexible conversations, enabling the exploration of expert insights while addressing key aspects of storytelling and Generation Z. The interview guideline, which can be found in Appendix B, was carefully structured in advance. (Helfferrich 2019) It consists of both open-ended questions and targeted subquestions that are intended to probe further into the topic. As further shown in the accompanying table, the questions were developed in accordance with the theoretical chapter's structure and in line with the secondary research question, guaranteeing coherence with the primary research question.

#### **3.2 Data Collection**

The data was collected through expert interviews, with a carefully selected sample of individuals chosen to provide perspectives relevant to the research question. (Homburg 2020) Experts in this study are classified as individuals with specialized knowledge. (Helfferrich

2019). The number of experts was determined specifically, as these individuals possess the specialist knowledge to adequately answer the research question. Determining the number of results also ensures a valid and in-depth evaluation, as this achieves saturation. At the same time, a variety of perspectives were integrated through the targeted selection in order to ensure coverage of relevant expert views from the areas of brand, generations, and marketing, as summarized in the following table. A detailed description of each expert's individual relevance can be found in Appendix A.

Table 1: Expert Overview

<b>Code</b>	<b>Job Title</b>	<b>Industry</b>
Exp1	Brand Manager	Retail
Exp2	Marketing	Retail
Exp3	Consultant	Consumer Goods
Exp4	GenZ Marketing Consultant	Agency
Exp5	Psychologist	Research

Source: Own representation

Table 2: Generation Z Overview

<b>Code</b>	<b>Persona Synonym</b>	<b>Age/Gender</b>
GenZ1	Young Influencer	15/Female
GenZ2	Trend-Conscious Heavy User	19/Female
GenZ3	Young Activist	21/Male
GenZ4	Digital Creative	23/Male
GenZ5	Working Professional	26/Female

Source: Own representation

Experts were chosen on the basis of their professional experience in generational research, marketing, or communication, as well as their familiarity with “Storytelling” and “Gen Z”. The theoretical findings serve as the foundation for the target group’s emphasis on Generation Z, guaranteeing that their primary characteristics, values, and interests are taken into account. Various participant profiles were specifically selected in order to accurately represent the

diversity of Generation Z in this study. The respondents, aged between 15 and 26, cover a range of life stages, genders and individual interests and values, providing representative insights into the multifaceted views of this generation. The selection ensures diverse subgroups of Generation Z are included to provide a nuanced view of this target group. In order to find suitable experts for each role, the personal and professional network was used and a targeted search was carried out on LinkedIn. The ten interviewees were interviewed via Microsoft Teams in German. Each interview was then transcribed, whereby receptive signals and filler words were not recorded and the conversations were transcribed into standard English. Non-verbal utterances such as (laughs) and pauses of three seconds or more were marked accordingly with (...). (Kuckartz and Rädoler 2022)

In accordance with Dresing and Pehl's recommendations, the interview partners were anonymized and systematic abbreviations such as Exp1 or GenZ1 were used to provide a better overview. (Dresing and Pehl 2011) It was deliberately decided not to formulate a separate question for each chapter. In some cases, additional follow-up questions were formulated, which were given an additional number (e.g. X.1). At the start of each interview, participants were briefed on the research objectives and topics. Standardized definitions of "storytelling", "brand storytelling", and "Generation Z" were provided to ensure a shared understanding. Participants were also informed about the anonymity of their data. The interview guide, including consent forms and definitions, is in Appendix B. With data collection complete, the focus shifts to analysis.

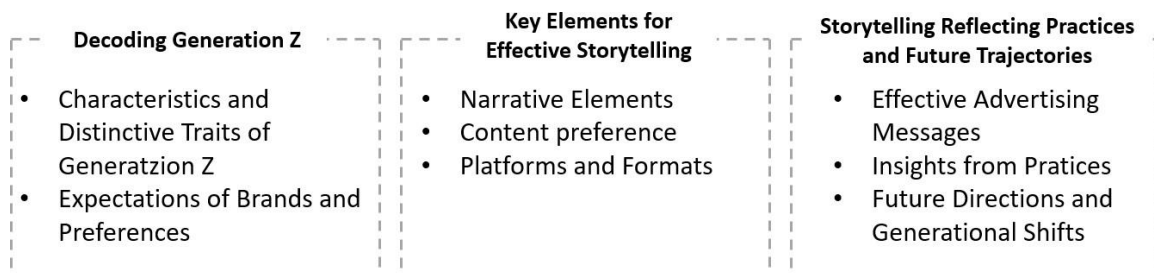
### 3.3 Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, the data obtained from the expert interviews was structured using Mayring's analysis technique and organized into categories to enable a systematic evaluation. In order to produce well-founded claims, qualitative data must be prepared in a methodical and structured manner, which is why this analytical approach was chosen. (Kuckartz and Rädoler 2022) According to Mayring, the categories were formed using a combination of deductive and inductive procedures.

In Appendix F, the final category system with all assigned interview sections can be found, while Appendix G contains the corresponding coding guideline, outlining the coding rules for each section along with a detailed description of the underlying principles.

An overview of the categories developed:

Figure 6: Categories Overview



Source: Own representation

In this context, three main categories were deductively developed according to Mayring's classification principle, which could be derived from the central research question. (Mayring 2016) Following Mayring's approach, the data were reviewed using categories, which were reassessed and adjusted after analyzing 10–30% of the material. (Mayring 2023) This iterative process resulted in eight subcategories under the main categories, which were reviewed and adapted during further analysis. (Mayring 2022) For example, the original subcategory "Characteristics" was split into "Characteristics" and "Expectations", as both Generation Z and the experts themselves formulated so many expectations of the generation towards brands that a separate category was deemed necessary. In order to shed more light on the interviews and the research question, the main categories of the analysis are discussed in the next section.

## **4. Results and Findings**

This section follows Mayring's method, using predefined categories to present key findings from expert and Generation Z interviews systematically.

### 4.1 Decoding Generation Z

This section outlines the foundational characteristics of Generation Z within the context of storytelling.

#### 4.1.1 Characteristics and Distinctive Traits of Generation Z

The analysis of the interviews revealed that both the experts and the Generation Z participants identified a number of essential aspects and distinctive traits that are either directly or indirectly highly significant to the topic of storytelling. A fundamental viewpoint on generational research is offered by Exp5, which emphasises that although the term describes general patterns within a generation, it is important to remember individual variances. Exp5 emphasizes the importance of differentiated segmentation within Generation Z to better target specific subgroups, essential for brands with segmented strategies. Proposed categories include socio-economic diversity, reflected in the stronger digital networking of urban groups, and financial backgrounds shaped by life phases and resources. These factors influence the perception of brands as status symbols.

Furthermore, the experts highlight the current stage of Generation Z's life, with Exp5 defining it specifically as identity formation, peer orientation, and the pursuit of meaning. For Generation Z, the process of creating their identities and values takes place mostly online. Exp1 emphasizes their worldwide connectedness, which shapes consumer habits by influencing peers, parents, and trends on social media. But according to Exp5, their continuous online presence causes a deluge of information and shortens their attention span. Fast-paced dynamics and microtrends force Generation Z to analyze information rapidly, determining the relevance of a message or product in a matter of seconds, according to Exp2.

The influence of constant stimuli on cognitive processing and the associated selective perception described by Exp5 already defines specific requirements for storytelling that are set by this generation. As Exp2 points out, Generation Z decides within a few seconds whether a piece of content deserves their attention. Therefore, as Exp5 also emphasizes, it is essential to design advertising measures in such a way that they effectively capture the attention of the target group, especially at the beginning, and generate an immediate emotional response.

#### 4.1.2 Expectations of Brands and Preferences

As previously mentioned, Generation Z stands out for having exceptionally high and well-defined expectations of brands, which calls for a unique strategy. Since most of the coded segments are assigned to this category, it is crucial to the interview analysis, underscoring the topic's significance.

Both the expectations developed by Generation Z and those examined by the experts are reflected in this. This finding is supported by Exp2, which also highlights how Generation Z's higher expectations impact the brand itself and increasingly influence its marketing and communication methods. As Exp3 notes, there is a greater need than ever for active, genuine brand communication, which creates significant difficulties for brands trying to attract this demographic.

As Exp5 highlights, a crucial feature of this generation is their strong sense of values, which was discussed in the previous chapter. They expect brands to naturally incorporate their values into their brand messaging in addition to sharing them. This is demonstrated, for instance, by the deliberate incorporation of diversity or other socially significant issues without the need for businesses to make a clear statement.

In addition, members of this generation expect brands to feel more personal and individual, as Exp2 describes. This personalization, which creates the feeling of an "own brand", is not only highlighted as crucial by Exp2 and 4, but is also emphasized by the generation itself in the interview. Personal experiences and an individual approach play a central role in brand loyalty. Customer loyalty, according to Exp2, is not created by the product alone, but by the experiences and values associated with the brand. Brands must actively include Generation Z in their strategies, as neglecting this group risks long-term damage to brand image. Exp3 highlights the importance of deliberate engagement to build lasting connections, a view echoed by GenZ2, who stress the need for brands to recognize their generation explicitly.

As already indicated, Generation Z expects brands to embody authenticity, credibility, transparency, and innovation, values emphasized by both experts and interview participants. Authenticity is key, with brands expected to convey consistent messages aligned with their values. GenZ4 highlights the importance of creative expression to showcase brand personality, while GenZ5 stresses that this creativity must feel genuine, not artificial.

The interviews place considerable emphasis on the importance of handling issues pertinent to Generation Z with great care, given the potential for commercial exploitation to be met with rejection. This concept is expanded upon in the chapter entitled “Effective Advertising Messages”, and is directly related to the practice of direct storytelling.

## 4.2. Key Elements for Effective Storytelling

This section explores the requirements and principles of a brand story as defined by the interview participants.

### 4.2.1 Narrative Elements

The first subchapter analyzes key storytelling elements from interviews with Generation Z and experts, focusing on characters, emotions, and plot. Generation Z sees characters as an essential component of effective stories. Characters are crucial for illustrating changes, bolstering narrative structure, and delivering emotional messages, according to GenZ1, GenZ2, and GenZ4. As GenZ1 points out, characters don’t have to be actual humans; if they effectively represent human characteristics and feelings, fictitious characters or animals can equally connect with the target audience. Another important component is the capacity to relate to characters. Particularly, GenZ2 emphasizes that relatable characters improve immersion and raise queries such as “Have I had a similar experience with this brand?” or “Could this be my story?”. GenZ3 goes on to say that while celebrities can attract attention, they often diminish authenticity and make identification more difficult. Finally, in order to guarantee wider audience relationships, Generation Z appreciates diversity and variety in character portrayals.

The role of emotions in narrative is a topic that is frequently highlighted by both Generation Z and experts in the field. While Generation Z indicated a significant desire for happy endings, Exp2 demonstrated that emotional narratives are efficacious and leave a lasting impression. GenZ1 highlighted the importance of a positive conclusion in preventing negative connotations. Furthermore, the incorporation of humour is of particular importance, as narratives presented in a light-hearted and amusing manner are more memorable and engaging for this generation.

Nevertheless, setting and narrative are also important components. As, GenZ3 claims that a realistic setting that depicts everyday conflicts or situations enhances relatability and promotes identification. At the same time, GenZ4 emphasized that stories are particularly intriguing to this group since unexpected plot lines and twists provide entertainment value.

The findings of the experts concur with the preferred storytelling elements identified in the Generation Z cohort. In addition, they propose strategic approaches tailored to the expectations of this target audience. In the view of Exp3, it is precisely this combination of everyday heroic figures and profound symbolism that particularly appeals to Generation Z.

Citing Exp5, this generation processes visual information very rapidly and effectively, especially when it comes to moving visuals. As a result, symbolic elements can be used strategically to draw in this target group, which is overloaded with stimuli. As suggested by Exp1, so-called “Easter eggs” can be deployed strategically to appeal to particular Generation Z trends or subcultures. Only individuals in this generation frequently actively notice these subtle allusions, which gives them an exclusive attraction. This encourages the personal identification and engagement in brand communication that GenZ4 emphasizes, in addition to creating the opportunity for the narrative “twist” that Exp2 noted.

Another point to mention is the importance of plot twist. Especially Exp3 mentions that the generation craves entertainment and surprises, and this possibility arises through the use of plot twist. Similarly, a moment of surprise or attention could be achieved with the help of irony itself. To bring it all together again, the interviewees emphasise how important it is for brands to self-reflect in their storytelling and see what really suits them.

#### 4.2.2 Content and Style Preference

When looking at the content, it becomes clear that the values of authenticity, relatability and credibility described by the generation itself also play a key role in the context of the content.

As noted by GenZ1 and GenZ3, themes like “real-life issues”, motivation, companionship, diversity, and societal concerns strike a deep chord. Furthermore, enticing is content that tackles common issues or subjects like body positivity and climate change, as long as it maintains credibility and stays away from overly commercialized. Such a value-orientated focus is in line with the trend towards unfiltered, authentic content that strengthens the credibility of the brand and promotes a deeper bond with this target group.

Additionally, Experts like Exp1, describe that it is more important to tell stories that immerse the generation in the story and involve them in the brand world. He describes that it is much more important to achieve this process than to present the product or brand in the most

favourable and presentable way possible. While, Exp2 has two ways of doing this content-wise, which are received differently by the generation. By showing content where the founders-story is present, she mentions that a way in which it is much more likely to emphasise the values of the brand, its journey, goals and credibility. In contrast, the consumer stories offer a better identification within the story. GenZ2 supports this, noting that understanding a founder's motivation enhances the perception of the brand's identity. Such stories make it clear that there are real people with convictions behind a brand, which makes it more tangible, credible and human for Generation Z.

#### 4.2.3 Platforms and Formats

In terms of platforms, it was noted that the generation mostly finds brand storytelling in traditional television ads. On the other hand, they describe that social media, in terms of advertising, is more characterised by product placement in general, influencer marketing or advertisements. This is also confirmed by GenZ4, which noted that stories are underrepresented on platforms such as TikTok or Instagram. In fact, however, the experts described the need for advertising formats that want to appeal to the generation to be on these platforms in particular. Furthermore, she pointed out that the integration of storytelling on these platforms could create a competitive advantage for the brand.

To ensure the effectiveness of this approach, the experts emphasise the uniqueness and differentiation of the individual platforms. They also emphasise the need to design stories specifically for each platform. Exp1 describes social media not just as communication channels, but as a chance to be an interactive storytelling platform that can encourage active engagement and create a stronger connection to the brand. This perspective is further elaborated by Exp4, who explains that platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube each require different narrative approaches. TikTok suits short, trend-driven stories for quick attention, while Instagram supports storytelling through stories, posts, and reels. YouTube allows deeper, more detailed brand narratives.

In relation to the question of how respondents believe the storytelling format needs to be adapted to the Generation, GenZ5 presents an approach of "loops". These are videos that seamlessly transition from the end to the beginning and thus encourage repeated viewing. This can create a kind of "narrative loop" that generates a higher frequency of views and is therefore easier to remember.

Within the expert group and among the representatives of Generation Z, video was described as the ideal format. In this regard, GenZ4 particularly emphasised the possibility of achieving a greater impact through the use of sound, colour and moving images. This viewpoint is corroborated by Exp1, who asserts that Generation Z exhibits a particular affinity for video media.

### 4.3 Storytelling reflecting Practices and Future Trajectories

This chapter examines brand storytelling's relevance for Generation Z.

#### 4.3.1 Effective Advertising Messages

Brand storytelling, identified in the theoretical chapter as a strategy for strengthening ties with Generation Z, is strongly supported by the interview results, as every participant emphasized how storytelling in commercials captures attention.

In the literature, storytelling is assigned a variety of different attributes and descriptions, which relate in particular to the generation for which they are relevant. In this context, reference should be made to the statements by GenZ1, according to which storytelling is more appealing than other forms of advertising due to its creative format and design. This view is supplemented by the statements of GenZ2, who argues that stories are able to arouse new feelings and emotions. This is due to the fact that the story has a stronger emotional impact and thus creates a better connection between the brand and the consumer. GenZ3 has also the opinion that the values of the brand itself can be transported in this way. In this context, it should be mentioned that, according to GenZ5, this form of advertising not only aims to market a product, but also to convey the brand itself; brands should actively recognise and use these opportunities.

One particularly interesting finding from the interviews was Generation Z's categorization of advertising formats. At the beginning of the interviews, the generation was asked why they perceive storytelling advertising as more effective than other advertising formats. The interviewees developed two clear categories of their own accord into which they classified advertisements. While, GenZ1 made an explicit distinction between "traditional advertising", which does not contain any core narrative elements such as a clear structure, storyline or characters, and storytelling ads, which do include these elements. The former were subsumed under the term "traditional advertising", while storytelling was defined as a separate category. GenZ4 similarly noted that storytelling ads differ from traditional advertising, standing out

through visually appealing presentations, innovative approaches, or unexpected twists that capture interest and foster deeper connections with the target group.

Several interviewees reported that they often do not consciously realize that storytelling advertising is an advertisement. GenZ5 explained that these formats can give the impression of being part of a series or show due to their immersive design. At the same time, GenZ1 added that such advertisements are often reminiscent of short TV series, whose emotional content and narrative structures make them particularly compelling.

The differentiation within Generation Z shows that this reflective group perceives storytelling advertising as more than classic advertisements. It is viewed as a narrative and emotional experience. GenZ5 and GenZ1 highlight that this format surpasses traditional marketing by offering a “TV show feeling” with immersive narratives, surprising twists, and high-quality experiences. Exp3 confirms that storytelling advertisements are often designed as continuous narratives. These foster identification and create a personal connection with the brand, enabling deeper engagement. Furthermore, Exp1, 3 and 4 underscored the necessity of enhancing narrative structures through the incorporation of unexpected narrative elements, as previously delineated in the preceding chapter, including plot twists and dynamic scene changes. Moreover, Exp3 also emphasized the importance of narrative approaches that encourage the target group to reflect. Questions could be raised such as: “Have I had a similar experience to the story depicted in the advertisement?” or “What was my first point of contact with this brand?” The reflectivity of the elements can contribute to the generation’s perception of the story in a reinforcing way. It can also serve to anchor the story in the memory of the recipients even after its conclusion.

Involving the community, according to Exp3, encourages communication and emotional ties because Generation Z wants to actively participate and impact stories rather than only absorb them. As explained by Exp4, encouraging the generation to tell their own stories also proves to be extremely beneficial. As this is a generation that is characterised by a strong need for participation, individuality and personality, it can be assumed that this is an opportunity to shape the advertisement messages for the generation.

According to The Experts, Generation Z places a high importance on brands recognizing and respecting them. Exp5 emphasizes that disregarding their principles or interests can cause

criticism and damage the brand's reputation, particularly when dealing with a target audience like Generation Z that is morally motivated, socially concerned, and media aware. Brands that behave insensitively or are seen as rude and dishonest run the risk of their messages not only failing to work, but also provoking unfavorable responses.

It is thus described that there is a significant risk if the values of this generation, such as inclusivity, equality and social responsibility, are ignored or disregarded. These challenges are deeply ingrained beliefs for Generation Z, not just trendy marketing jargon. This target demographic frequently views disregarding these values—or, more gravely, making fun of them—as a personal assault. According to Exp5, this might result in a tense situation when a brand's messaging conflicts with one's own values and expectations. Brands risk both passive rejection and active countermeasures like boycotts, which can harm their reputation for a long time, especially when stereotypes or a lack of respect for diversity are prevalent. Additionally, it is stressed that speaking in a condescending or insulting manner is especially harmful if it is directed specifically at Generation Z. Clearly, Brands that trivialize or overly dramatize key concerns of this generation, such as mental health, activism or equality, risk being seen as disrespectful and inappropriate by the target group.

All things considered Exp5 highlights that Generation Z values a balance between humor and respect in brand communication. While they appreciate humor and self-irony, they also expect to be taken seriously. GenZ2 and GenZ4 deem unrealistic portrayals or exaggerated claims, like glossy advertisements that promise unachievable perfection or “universal solutions”, as inauthentic.

#### 4.3.2 Insights from Practice

Based on Mayring's research, this category developed inductively since each participant gave an example of a story. Two are examined due to scope constraints, and all of the advertisements addressed are included in Appendix D along with attributions and succinct summaries of their distinctive features as stated by the interviewees.

As explained in the previous chapter, the generation wants brands not to misuse their values and themes for advertising purposes. GenZ5 cited the 2017 Pepsi ad with Kendall Jenner as a particularly noteworthy example. Due to its insensitive treatment of subjects that are very important to Generation Z, the advertisement received a lot of criticism. It made an effort to

capitalize on protest images, such as that of the Black Lives Matter movement, but the use of Kendall Jenner, who is not a credible social activist, made it seem inauthentic. Consequently, the campaign came out as tone-deaf and unauthentic. The target audience thought the execution was disrespectful and shallow, hence the attempt to spread a message of harmony and unity around the world was unsuccessful. GenZ5 underlined that there was a significant response since the commercial fell short of expectations for sensitive and genuine storytelling and failed to sufficiently take into account the social context.

Furthermore, Aldi's "AldiStory" campaign, which consists of three parts, should be highlighted. This campaign is derived from Exp1 is a current and incredibly effective example of focused storytelling, especially for Generation Z. A link to the described advertisement, including its translation, can be found in Appendix D. The campaign aims to communicate to viewers that Aldi's products have long been an integral part of many people's lives, positively influencing their everyday experiences. The campaign's episodic format, which created anticipation through a phased rollout and sustained the audience's interest over time, was essential, according to Exp1. Additionally, he highlights how successfully the teaser worked to pique interest and show how a skillfully written story arc can captivate Generation Z. Specifically a key, noted by Exp1, is the use of personalized storytelling, featuring ordinary customers as protagonists. This strategy demonstrated how Aldi Süd's products fit into daily life and offered authenticity. Further highlighting how the campaign reflected the diversity of the target audience, portraying families from various cultural and social backgrounds, which sent a strong message of inclusivity. Furthermore, the aspect of time is taken into account as the stories explain that Aldi products have played an important role in people's lives for many years and have characterised them in different ways. This creates a connection, but also a nostalgic element, as Exp1 explains.

Exp4 concludes by highlighting the campaign's capacity to promote engagement. Through the use of the hashtag #TellUsYourAldiStory, the campaign prompted the target audience to participate, adding a personal and captivating element that struck a deep chord with Generation Z and solidified the audience-brand relationship.

#### 4.3.3 Future Directions and Generational Shifts

This study is based on the development opportunities for storytelling noted by the experts, with a particular focus on the design of storytelling for the generation itself.

An important trend that Exp1 and Exp2 emphasise is the need to expand storytelling channels in order to do justice to the presence of Generation Z on different platforms. For example, Exp2 describes the need to offer storytelling across platforms. At the same time, Exp5 also emphasises its relevance for reaching the target group via different channels, as brands can also use platforms such as TikTok to distribute additional content alongside traditional media such as TV or YouTube. The desire for storytelling to take place more on the preferred platforms of Generation Z was therefore expressed by representatives of this target group. GenZ4 found that storytelling adverts are rarely found on social media, but are mainly seen on TV. The necessity and need described above can be described as the first shifts to which brands must respond.

Another could be the integration of influencers as a means of brand storytelling. Exp3 and GenZ4 point out that influencers are currently mainly used to promote a product or brand directly, rather than integrating them into an authentic and emotionally engaging narrative structure. An innovative approach, as described by Exp1, would be to integrate influencers more into traditional storytelling formats in which they create a trustworthy and emotional connection to the brand through their own stories. This development could change the traditional role of influencers and turn them into active creators of a more comprehensive brand message.

The same could also be considered for the area of user-generated content (UGC). Where the storytelling also takes place on the desired platforms, but the customers themselves produce the content in the form of stories. Exp4 emphasises that this could actively encourage the target group to create their own content and share it on social media. Exp2 emphasises that co-creation could play a central role in brand storytelling in the future, as it transforms the target group from passive consumers to active co-creators.

The Experts agree that the future of storytelling lies in more intensive cooperation between brands and consumers. They emphasise the importance of co-creation in order to create deeper connections with the target group, especially Generation Z. Despite the opportunity to capitalise on trends in storytelling, engagement can be increased. Exp4 notes that Generation Z's focus on rapidly changing micro-trends can compromise relevance during ad production, while Exp3 emphasises that trends must be authentically aligned with the brand so that its credibility is not compromised.

## 5. Reflection and Result Discussion

The theoretical chapter established the foundations for the terms storytelling and Generation Z, while this chapter connects the theory to the research and discusses the results. Generation Z's short attention span and selective perception were identified. Exp5 highlighted the challenge of constant stimuli, with Generation Z engaging only with content that directly appeals to their interests or needs. This shows how storytelling must be tailored to their perception patterns.

As noted in the literature, Generation Z has diverse expectations, confirmed by both experts and Generation Z representatives. The "expectations" category was the largest, with the most segment sections, highlighting expectations such as the correct representation of brand values, individual recognition, feedback response, and authenticity. An important aspect from the interviews is that Generation Z does not want to be excluded. They view it negatively if their values are ignored or misused in storytelling. This can manifest in various narrative elements, such as inauthentic characters (e.g., celebrities) that make the brand seem insincere or exploiting themes like mental health and sustainability. An example of failed storytelling cited by GenZ5 highlights this issue. These findings align with the theory that, as Watt (2023) noted, "cancel culture" on social media can cause significant damage.

In line with Zhang (2023) description, content is preferred by Generation Z and generates attention if it includes everyday situations and topics that are considered interesting by the generation. Equally important is the message, which for Generation Z should be emotional, clear, and stronger than the products or brand names. The brand message should be subtly integrated into the storytelling. Additionally, the content and narrative elements must align with the brand to avoid inauthenticity. Another element that can contribute to authenticity is the use of the founder's story to create a stronger connection to Generation Z.

Brands distribute their stories transmedially on platforms frequented by Generation Z, as described in theory. Experts suggested adapting content to each platform, such as adjusting brevity and tempo, using "behind the scenes" moments, and encouraging interaction through calls like "#ShareOurStory". Generation Z confirmed that only a few brands currently share their stories on preferred platforms.

However, the story can also be disseminated via other media that do not belong to the traditional storytelling formats as defined in the theoretical chapter. An example of this is the

mention of the IKEA poster advertisement by Generation Z, which impressively demonstrated that a story can be told beyond the video format and also has a strong impact in other formats. However, in terms of preferred format, video is the preferred medium, which is confirmed by the underlying literature.

Another point highlighted by the research is the increasing tendency of Generation Z to place themselves at the center of the story. This fact was emphasized by several experts and differs from the understanding that Miller (2017) describes of the traditional “hero-approach”. It means much more that Generation Z’s preference is for the representation of their own values, ideas, colors, and content in the story. Generation Z therefore strives for a holistic, self-reflective narrative in which they can actively participate. Exp2 refers to this phenomenon as “co-creation” and emphasizes that Generation Z already wants to be seen as co-creators of the brand story by influencing the development of the story itself. According to Exp3, brands should tell authentic stories of the Generation Z consumer group themselves, as the mentioned example #AldiStory by Exp1 illustrates.

As a result, the company would consider and incorporate Generation Z’s real-life experiences and narratives into its brand messaging, strengthening its bond and identification with the target audience.

The concept of self-creation of brand stories can also be extended to the social media space, which Exp1 proposes through user-generated content (UGC). This allows them to share their own stories, expanding the storytelling experience while targeting their preferred channels.

The points outlined illustrate that the concept of storytelling will actively evolve in its elements and aspects, as has already been noted in research. This aligns with the concept developed by Moin, where the current wave of development is driven by authenticity, but there is a noticeable shift toward co-creation, led by Generation Z. A suggestion on how this development could be characterized is described in Appendix E, indicating that it might be the first signs of a co-creation narrative era.

## 6. Conclusions

The final chapter summarizes key findings, explores further research opportunities, and discusses practical implications for implementation.

### 6.1 Research Conclusion

This chapter revisits the qualitative research conducted in relation to the research question: “*To what extent does the marketing tool of brand storytelling need to be adapted in order to effectively address Generation Z and win them as a target group in the long term?*” As noted at the end of Chapter 2, the research question was refined into three sub-questions to guide the interviews. This decision followed the literature review, which indicated the need for an exploratory approach to examine various directions. The sub-questions enabled a more focused and structured analysis, allowing for a deeper exploration of the topic.

The first sub-question, “Which narrative elements and storytelling techniques are particularly suitable for building long-term emotional connections with Generation Z?” was addressed by the research, which identified that characters and emotions are especially significant for this generation. However, it is also crucial that Generation Z sees themselves reflected in the narrative elements, particularly in a subtle way that resonates with their identity. In terms of storytelling techniques, the desire to create an immersive experience was a central finding, with Generation Z seeking stories that evoke the feeling they desire, particularly in TV and media content. Furthermore, the importance of inclusion was highlighted, not only through relatable content but also by actively encouraging engagement, such as inviting Generation Z to share their own stories, which promotes co-creation.

The second sub-question, “What types of content/ brand message does Generation Z prefer to engage with in brand storytelling?” revealed that the content should authentically reflect the brand’s identity and values. Authenticity emerged as a key point, with a significant concern about brands exploiting Generation Z’s values for marketing purposes. A major mistake identified in brand storytelling was the failure to genuinely acknowledge Generation Z’s values or, worse, exploiting these values purely for marketing gain.

The third sub-question, “How will Generation Z itself influence the future of storytelling?” showed a clear trend where Generation Z is not just passively consuming brand stories but actively shaping them. The research indicated a shift towards Generation Z becoming central

figures in storytelling, not only as participants but also as influencers who will extend the reach of brand narratives across various advertising elements. This trend also extends to platform usage, where Generation Z's preferences demand that brands engage across multiple platforms simultaneously, tailoring stories for each.

To answer the primary research question, "*To what extent does the marketing tool of brand storytelling need to be adapted in order to effectively address Generation Z and win them as a target group in the long term?*", it is evident that brand storytelling must undergo substantial adaptation to effectively engage Generation Z.

Firstly, it is essential for brands to identify the values and needs of the generation and take them seriously. It is important to ensure that the topics that are of interest to the generation or that they stand for are not instrumentalised for marketing purposes. In this regard, please refer to the explanations in the chapters. Storytelling must become more flexible, authentic, and transparent as a marketing tool, while also being quick to adapt. This includes leveraging social media channels where Generation Z actively shares and tells their own stories with the brand, making the communication process more participatory. Notably, Generation Z does not yet classify storytelling as "traditional advertising", which presents an opportunity for brands to move quickly and capitalize on this form of communication. Therefore, Brands must leverage the advantage of being swift and adapting to this form of advertising. To do so, companies must tailor the marketing tool of storytelling in such a way that Generation Z perceives storytelling not only as a message from brands but as an active participant. Generation Z becomes a co-creator of the brand's narrative, influencing and shaping the communication strategy through their own stories, which they share across their platforms. This approach allows brands to address the barriers Generation Z faces, as they can identify with the narrative elements such as content and character. These characters reflect the same values and beliefs that Generation Z holds, while also accounting for the speed and versatility of the platforms on which they engage. As Generation Z shares content across the platforms they use, this opens up numerous opportunities for brands to connect with them. Additionally, by embracing this communication style, brands may be able to overcome Generation Z's short attention span and capture their focus more effectively.

To sum up, storytelling needs to change to involve Generation Z as active contributors who help create and spread the brand's narrative rather than just as a passive audience. In order to

effectively connect and maintain Generation Z as a target population over the long term, brands must embrace flexibility, authenticity, and diversity in their storytelling efforts.

## 6.2 Practical Contributions

The goal of this dissertation was to create workable plans for modifying storytelling as a marketing tactic to satisfy the unique requirements and preferences of Generation Z. In order to help businesses maximize their communication strategies, the main research topic was on how storytelling needs to be adjusted to properly engage this target population. The investigation emphasizes how crucial it is to modify storytelling to highlight emotional connection, authenticity, and topics that are pertinent to Generation Z. Important tactics include utilizing popular music and likable characters, giving preference to platforms that this demographic prefers, and utilizing innovative methods like cross-platform storytelling and co-creation. Brand rejection is possible if their ideals are trivialized or ignored.

## 6.3 Limitations of the Study

In order to maintain transparency and put the results in context, this dissertation admits limitations. The choice to employ an exploratory strategy in qualitative research, specifically through expert interviews, carries with it the possible drawback that the interviewees' responses may be arbitrary and so affect the findings. In the situation of Generation Z, this constraint is especially pertinent because, despite thematic saturation, a limited amount of interviews reduced the depth of the insights obtained. This restriction also holds true for the expert group, whose responses may have been less thorough due in part to professional confidentiality agreements with their employers. Additionally, the study's geographical focus on Germany restricts the transferability of results, as cultural and social differences exist across Europe. However, this focus provided a solid foundation for future studies.

## 6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

A wider and more representative target group within Generation Z could be used in a study to overcome the problem caused by the limited number of participants. Moreover, it would be advantageous to examine particular theories using quantitative approaches. For example, in order to more thoroughly examine the efficacy and mechanisms of various advertising strategies, such as co-creation or highly tailored advertising, experimental designs could be used to test them methodically. A comparative study that examines regional and cultural variations in the expectations and perceptions of brand storytelling in various nations could broaden the geographic restriction to the German setting. The exploratory contribution made

by this dissertation establishes the framework for future research on the storytelling technique in the context of Generation Z.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Detailed Experten Overview

Code	Job Title	Industry	Experience	Relevance for the Interview
Exp1	Brand Manager	Retail – major German supermarket chain	10 years	Extensive experience in brand management; strategic insights into crafting communication strategies for advertising
Exp 2	Marketing Specialist	Retail - major German supermarket chain	8 years	Hands-on experience in retail marketing; contributed to the development of the current advertising approach for the supermarket chain
Exp 3	Consultant	Consulting - Marketing and Branding	7 years	Strategic advisory on brand positioning; valuable for approaches to differentiation and targeting Generation Z
Exp 4	Generation Z Marketing Consultant	Gen Z Marketing Agency	2 years	Knowledge of trends and preferences of Generation Z; insights into creative storytelling for deeper audience engagement
Exp 5	Psychologist specializing in behavioral research	Psychologist - the Institute for Generational Research at a German university	15 years	Research on behavioral patterns and decision-making processes of Generation Z; valuable insights on narrative elements

Source: Own representation

Code	Persona Synonym	Age	Gender	Education and Professional Background/ Characteristics	Relevance for the Interview
GenZ1	The Young Influencer	15	Female	Student, influences her parents, has her own allowance, highly active on YouTube and Instagram	Insights into targeted messaging for younger Gen Z through personalized content and social media storytelling
GenZ2	The Trend-Conscious Heavy User	19	Female	Currently in her gap year, fast-paced, loves new trends and influencer marketing	Insights into content for brand communication
GenZ3	The Young Activist	21	Male	Bachelor's degree; currently completing an internship, engaged in social causes, advocates for sustainability	Relevant for ethical and social storytelling, insights into authenticity
GenZ4	The Digital Creative	23	Male	Architecture student, less active on social media	Relevant for personalized storytelling approaches
GenZ5	The Working Professional	26	Female	Full-time in the business field, price-conscious	Relevant for brand loyalty through valuable content and authentic storytelling

Source: Own representation

## Appendix B: Interview Guideline Expert

Good day! First of all, thank you very much for taking the time to participate in my interview—I truly appreciate it. My name is Alina Schefers, and I am a Master’s student in the Management program at Católica School in Lisbon. I am currently working on my Master’s thesis, where I am investigating the connection between storytelling, specifically brand storytelling, and Generation Z.

The aim of this interview is to understand to what extent Generation Z influences storytelling and how brand storytelling may need to be adapted to meet their expectations. This will involve both your personal insights and your professional expertise in the relevant areas. Before we begin, I would like to ask for your permission to record this interview. Please note that your responses will be anonymized, and the audio files will not be published; they are solely for research purposes. If you agree, please confirm by saying “Yes.” I have already sent you the questionnaire along with a standardized definition of storytelling and brand storytelling. Do you have any questions regarding these materials? If you have any further questions before we start, please feel free to ask; otherwise, I will begin the recording now.

*(Start of recording)*

### Question overview:

Chapter Name	Questions	Link to the secondary research questions
Introduction to Storytelling	Def.: Storytelling is the art of crafting and structuring narratives to convey information and ideas in a way that evokes emotions, builds memories, and engages the audience.  Def.: Brand storytelling describes the strategic use of narrative elements to build an emotional and lasting connection between a brand and its audience.	Establishes a common understanding of storytelling and brand storytelling as foundational concepts.
Brand Storytelling: Basics and Importance	1. Based on your experience, how effective do you find the use of storytelling techniques as a marketing tool, especially for capturing the attention and interest of Generation Z?	2. What types of content/ brand message does Generation Z prefer to engage with in brand storytelling?

Core Elements of Brand Storytelling	2. Which specific narrative elements, such as characters, plot, conflict, or emotions, do you consider particularly effective for capturing Generation Z's attention?	1. Which narrative elements and storytelling techniques are particularly suitable for building long-term emotional connections with Generation Z?
Advertising Storytelling	3. When thinking about storytelling as a marketing tool for Generation Z, which brand comes to mind?  3.1 What makes this brand particularly impactful in your view, and what aspects of its brand storytelling stand out?	2. What types of content/brand message does Generation Z prefer to engage with in brand storytelling?
Current Trends and Developments in Storytelling	4. What current trends in storytelling do you observe?  5. To what extent do you think these trends align with the preferences and expectations of Generation Z?	3. How does Generation Z influence the storytelling of brands and their communication strategies through their preferences and interactivity?
Defining the Target Audience: Generation Z	6. What unique challenges do you currently see in connection with brand storytelling for Generation Z?  7. Based on your experience, what challenges exist in traditional storytelling, and what specific features, channels, or strategies could help overcome these?	3. How does Generation Z influence the storytelling of brands and their communication strategies through their preferences and interactivity?
Characteristics and Values of Generation Z	8. To what extent do you think Generation Z is interested in actively participating in co-creating content?  9. What type of personalized stories particularly appeal to Generation Z, and what experiences have you had in this regard?	1. Which narrative elements and storytelling techniques are particularly suitable for building long-term emotional connections with Generation Z?
Market Relevance and Economic Importance of Generation Z	10. What general expectations do you think Generation Z has of brands, particularly in terms of communication and engagement?	2. What types of content/brand message does Generation Z prefer to engage with in brand storytelling?
Generation Z's Communication and Media Use; Consumption and Purchasing Behavior	11. Which digital platforms and tools do you use to effectively reach Generation Z, and what role do they play in the storytelling process?	3. How does Generation Z influence the storytelling of brands and their communication strategies through their preferences and interactivity?

We've reached the end of the interview. Thank you very much for your time and insights. I hope you have a great day/evening ahead.





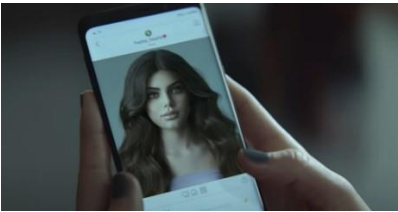

## Appendix C: Interview Guideline Generation Z




*Same Introduction like the Expert Group.*

### Question overview:

Chapter Name	Questions	Link to the secondary research questions
Introduction to Storytelling	Same Definition like the Expert Group	-
Brand Storytelling: Basics and Significance	1. In your own words, what does storytelling mean to you, and how do you perceive it when brands tell stories? 2. Do you feel that brand stories create a stronger connection for you compared to traditional advertising? Why or why not?	3. How does Generation Z influence the storytelling of brands and their communication strategies through their preferences and interactivity?
Core Elements of Brand Storytelling	3. What elements in a story (such as characters, conflicts, emotions) particularly appeal to you and make a brand more interesting? 4. Is there anything specific you value when brands tell stories, such as the stories being realistic, emotional, or exciting?	1. Which narrative elements and storytelling techniques are particularly suitable for building long-term emotional connections with Generation Z?
Advertising Storytelling	5. Which brands come to mind that tell good stories? 6. What makes the storytelling approach of this brand particularly effective for you?	2. What types of content/ brand message does Generation Z prefer to engage with in brand storytelling?
Current Trends and Developments in Storytelling	7. What types of stories that brands tell do you find particularly engaging today?	2. What types of content/ brand message does Generation Z prefer to engage with in brand storytelling?
Characteristics and Values	8. To what extent do you appreciate it when brands tell you personalized stories that are tailored to your interests?	1. Which narrative elements and storytelling techniques are particularly suitable for building long-term emotional connections with Generation Z?
Market Relevance and Economic Significance of Generation Z	9. Are there specific themes or topics that you feel brands should take seriously to genuinely connect with you?	2. What types of content/ brand message does Generation Z prefer to engage with in brand storytelling?
Communication and Media Use of Generation Z; Consumption and Purchasing Behavior	10. On which platforms do you encounter the best examples of storytelling from brands? 11. What type of digital content do you prefer when it comes to brands (e.g., videos, social media posts, blog articles)?	3. How does Generation Z influence the storytelling of brands and their communication strategies through their preferences and interactivity?

Appendix D: Mentioned Brand storytelling ADs

Assi- gnment	Characteristics of the advertisement as described by the individual	Name of the advertisement
GenZ1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human like traits that made it so emotional</li> <li>• See emotions and reactions on its face</li> <li>• Made the connection stronger</li> <li>• Happy ending</li> </ul>	 <p><i>Christmas Ad 2018: What would Christmas be without love?</i></p>
GenZ2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Founder or CEO stories because they can be empowering.</li> <li>• They are much more effective in conveying the brand identity and the story behind its founding</li> </ul>	 <p><i>Patagonia: Unfashionable</i></p>
GenZ3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tells a story through images</li> <li>• Emotional theme from birth to death</li> <li>• Symbolic of life through its length</li> <li>• Ikea creates stories on all communication platforms under the slogan “Inspired by life”</li> </ul>	 <p><i>Ikea: OOH-Kampagne</i></p>
GenZ3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyday topics that interest Gen Z</li> <li>• Moving out is a current topic for me</li> <li>• Humorous</li> <li>• Not too serious</li> </ul>	 <p><i>Ikea: Mach das Beste draus.</i> <i>Translation: Ikea: Make the best of it.</i></p>
GenZ4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Important message</li> <li>• A current topic that many young people experience themselves and can relate to</li> <li>• Inner beauty</li> </ul>	 <p><i>Dove: Reverse Selfie</i></p>
GenZ5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional story</li> <li>• Evokes empathy</li> <li>• Describes the journey of the duck</li> <li>• Portrays human-like traits</li> <li>• Not about “selling something” just beautiful to watch</li> </ul>	 <p><i>Disneyland Paris: The little duck</i></p>

<p>GenZ3 GenZ5</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional story</li> <li>• Strong memorability</li> <li>• Involves multiple generations</li> <li>• Christmas element</li> <li>• Nostalgia of being with family at Christmas</li> </ul>	 <p>Edeka: #heimkommen Translation: Edeka: #cominghome</p>
<p>GenZ5</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Criticism of advertising</li> <li>• Topics were trivialized</li> <li>• Overly glorified</li> <li>• Lacked authenticity</li> </ul>	 <p>Pepsi: "The Controversial Kendall Jenner Commercial"</p>
<p>Exp1</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-Creation</li> <li>• Nostalgia and family themes</li> <li>• "Tell us your Aldi story"</li> <li>• Creates a sense of personal connection</li> <li>• By inviting consumers to "Tell us your Aldi story," it turns them into co-creators</li> </ul>	 <p>Aldi: #AldiStory</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Aldi Story: Part1</a>: The Cans</li> <li>• <a href="#">Aldi Story Part 2</a>: Family Sauer</li> <li>• <a href="#">Aldi Story: Part3</a>: Sedef Adasis</li> </ul>

## Translation Guide to #AldiStory

### Aldi Story: Part1: Can

- Woman at the passport control checkpoint: "All of this really happened."
- Official behind passport control: "Would she please step forward"; "Reason for travel, please."
- Can: "I would like to visit my family in izmir."
- Official behind passport control: "Have a good trip."
- Cans Mother: "Do you have them with you?"
- Text Description at the end: "Nutcrackers" from Aldi Süd are the favorite gift from Can's Turkish family. Back then as well as today. All have one. Tell us yours. #AldiStory

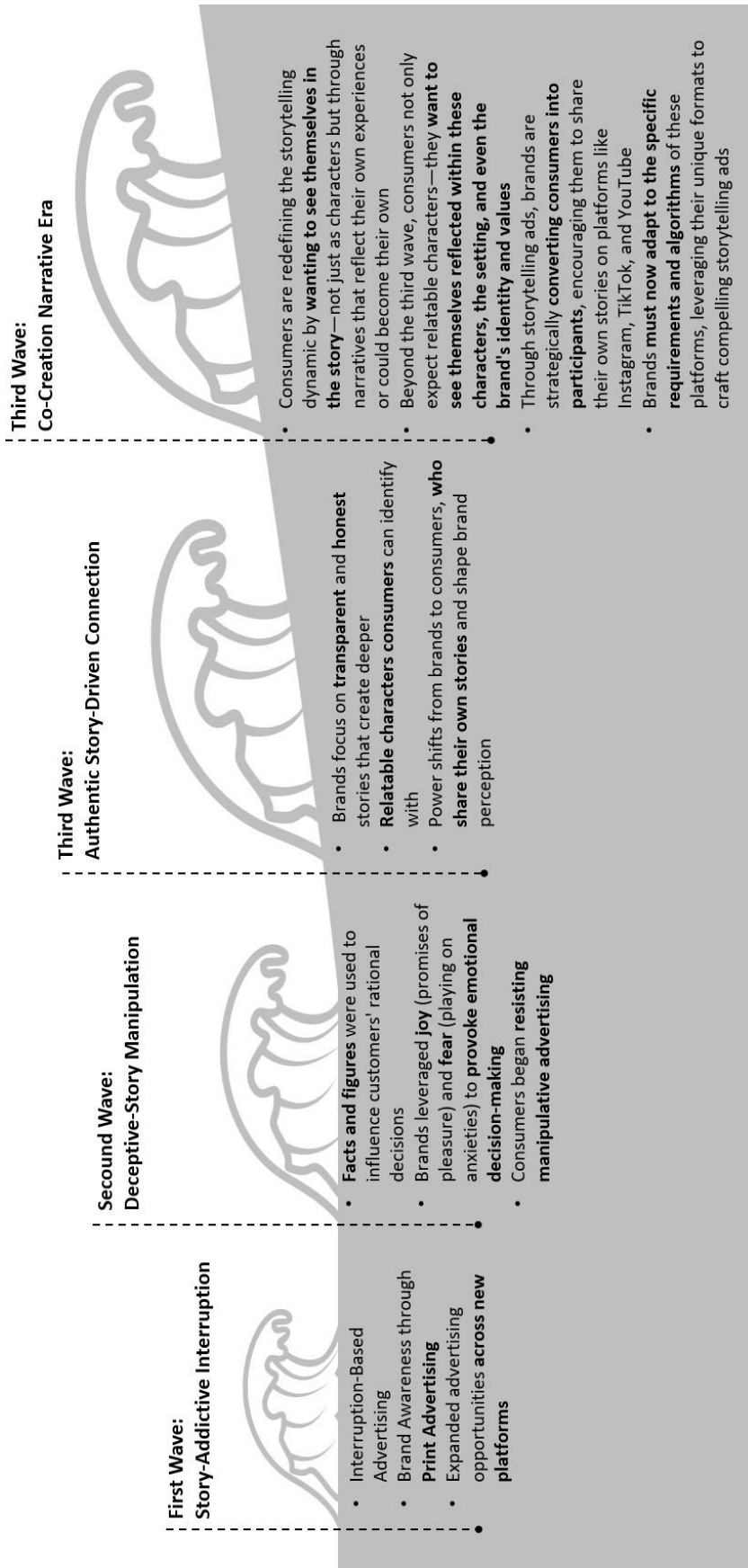
### Aldi Story: Part2: Family Sauer

- Older Daughter: "They've already told the story a hundred times"
- Text Description at the end: To save money, the Sauers travelled to Italy every year with 10 kilos of spaghetti and pesto from Aldi Süd. The main thing is that they were together. That is Family Sauers Story. All have one. Tell us yours. #AldiStory

### Aldi Story: Part3: Sedef Adasis

- Father: "And this is how it all began"
- Text Description at the end: That is Sedef Adasis Story. All have one. Tell us yours. #AldiStory

## Appendix E: Conceptual Framework: Fourth Wave



## Appendix F: Final Category System

Category	Definition
<b>Overarching Category:</b> Decoding Generation Z	Provides an in-depth exploration of Generation Z, focusing on their unique characteristics, values, and expectations toward brands.
<b>Subordinate Category:</b> Characteristics and Distinctive Traits of Generation Z	Compilation of the defining attributes, behavioral patterns, and digital orientation of Generation Z.
<p>“... Generation Z is hugely relevant because they’re the first generation to grow up entirely in a digital and globally connected world.” (Exp1, 756-757)</p> <p>“...just tech-savvy but also have a completely different attitude towards brands and consumption compared to previous generations.” (Exp1, 757-758)</p> <p>“...they’re also driving significant change in traditional marketing – they’ll keep shaking things up, for sure. Plus, they’re incredibly influential as consumers and are already shaping trends that end up impacting other generations too. So, if we adapt to Generation Z now, we’re essentially preparing for the future of the entire consumer market.” (Exp1, 761-765)</p> <p>“...generation has the power to hurt brands – much more than any other generation before them. Their influence on social media is just massive, and they really know how to use it.” (Exp1, 769-771)</p> <p>“...they’re incredibly good at dissecting brands and publicly evaluating them, especially on social media. If they feel a brand isn’t addressing their values or expectations, negative feedback can spread like wildfire.” (Exp1, 778-780)</p> <p>“But if a brand chooses to ignore them, it risks falling behind – and it might be really tough to close that gap later on.” (Exp1, 780-784)</p> <p>“...having a shorter attention span, these surprise moments really speak to them.” (Exp2, 1035-1036)</p> <p>“...generation is constantly online and expects brands to be able to react to changes and trends in real time. Storytelling is therefore no longer a static strategy - it must be flexible, dynamic, adaptable and evolving.” (Exp3, 1287-1289)</p> <p>“...having such a massive influence on brands and their marketing approaches. Generation Z is reshaping the game in a way that’s not just happening now but will keep driving change in the future—it’s truly a game changer.” (Exp3, 1290-1292)</p> <p>“...Gen Z is critical of products being presented as simple solutions for complex mental health challenges. They don’t want ads that suggest there’s an ‘all-encompassing solution’ for everything.” (Exp4, 1419-1421)</p> <p>“...generation is critical, and they instantly notice when a brand is inconsistent or doesn’t feel genuine.” (Exp4, 1491-1492)</p> <p>“...They offer us clues about overarching currents within the generation, but of course, every individual is unique. Nonetheless, these findings help us develop targeted communication strategies tailored to the central needs and values of the majority.” (Exp5, 1544-1546)</p> <p>“...psychological perspective, one of the biggest challenges is that Generation Z has grown up in a world full of stimuli—you know, this constant sensory overload.” (Exp5, 1553-1554)</p>	

“...practically always online, always connected, and constantly bombarded with information. This ranges from social media to advertising to the sheer volume of content they encounter daily. This has taught them to be very selective about what they notice and what they don’t. But it also directly impacts their cognitive processing and their ability to focus on content.” (Exp5, 1555-1558)

“...constant sensory overload—whether it’s from notifications, new posts, or ads—the attention span of Generation Z has significantly shortened. We often refer to this as ‘Reduced Attention Span.’” (Exp5, 1563-1564)

“...that they decide within seconds whether a piece of content interests them or not. For brands, this is obviously a huge challenge. Their messages not only need to be short and concise but must also evoke an emotional response—right from the first moment. If they don’t, the target audience simply scrolls past.” (Exp5, 1565-1568)

“...kind of ‘Cognitive Overload,’ meaning cognitive overload. The sheer volume of information they consume daily makes it harder for them to deeply process or analyze content. This means that even if a message is interesting, it can easily get lost in the flood of impressions.” (Exp5, 1569-1572.)

“...essentially ‘always on.’ This means they spend the majority of their day online—whether it’s on social media, in chats, or consuming streaming content. At first glance, this might seem like an advantage because they’re constantly reachable, but it often leads to something we call ‘Digital Fatigue,’ or digital exhaustion. The problem with this is that this constant digital presence can be mentally very taxing.” (Exp5, 1576-1581)

“...processes content on two levels. On one side, there’s heuristic processing. This is the fast, intuitive, and rather superficial mode. This happens, for instance, when someone scrolls through their social media feed. They see an image, a video, or a headline and decide within seconds whether it’s relevant or not. Here, things like visual aesthetics, emotional triggers, and short, clear messages are critical to even getting noticed. Then there’s systematic processing. This is the deeper level, which comes into play when a topic is truly personally relevant to someone. In this mode, the audience thinks about the message, reflects on it, and analyzes it. This doesn’t happen often, but when it does, the message has real potential to stick.” (Exp5, 1590-1598)

“...brings us to the emotional needs of this generation. Generation Z is in a phase of identity formation, actively seeking answers to the questions, ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What values do I stand for?’ This search for meaning significantly shapes their (...).” (Exp5, 1614-1618)

“...self-efficacy expectation. It’s about this generation wanting to feel that their actions can truly make a difference—whether in societal matters or personal challenges. Empowerment is a central term when it comes to addressing this target group.” (Exp5, 1627-1629)

“...social-psychological dynamics are a really crucial point. I mean, Generation Z is highly influenced by their peers—what’s known in psychology as social proof. This means they often align their behavior with what their social group or community does. What I find particularly interesting is that this doesn’t just happen offline but is also highly pronounced online on platforms like TikTok or Instagram.” (Exp5, 1634-1641)

“...often viewed as a homogeneous target group, which is true to some extent. But as I mentioned at the beginning, within this group, there are naturally differences, just like in any other generation. (...) Especially when it comes to successfully addressing this target group,

it’s essential to understand their subgroups and underlying diversity. I think it helps to look at the most important distinctions that are truly relevant for brands. Let me try to explain this with an example of how these differences can play a role in communication.” (Exp5, 1658-1663)

“...cultural and ethnic diversity within Generation Z is a very important point. This generation is, in many countries, the most ethnically diverse ever. In the U.S., for example, nearly half of Generation Z belongs to non-white minorities. (...) This not only influences their values but also their expectations of brands. Migrant children or people with hybrid identities—those who reflect both their heritage and the dominant culture of their country—feel especially addressed when brands respect this dual identity.” (Exp5, 1685-1689)

“...significant part of Generation Z also belongs to the LGBTQIA+ community or actively supports it. This group places a high value on inclusivity and appreciates brands that respect their identity and communicate without stereotypes. Absolut Vodka and Skittles, with their Pride campaigns, have shown how to authentically address this target group.” (Exp5, 1697-1700)

“...Gen Z. Additionally, this generation is highly visually oriented. Studies show that visual content is processed much faster and remembered longer by the brain than text-based content. (...) That’s why brands should tell stories that are visually compelling and immediately capture attention. But it’s not just about visuals – multisensory storytelling can be incredibly effective. Incorporating not just images but also audio, movement, or even tactile elements enhances both emotional and cognitive processing. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram are perfect examples. Dynamic, short, and visually appealing content works really well there because such content stimulates the brain’s reward system. (...) This results in stronger engagement from the target audience – they simply respond more intensely to it.” (Exp5, 1712-1720)

“...due to their life phases and psychological development. They are currently – psychologically speaking – in a phase heavily characterized by identity formation, peer orientation, and the search for meaning. This phase will change in the coming years as the generation enters the workforce, achieves financial independence, and perhaps takes on new roles like starting their own families.” (Exp5, 1768-1772)

<b>SC:</b> Expectations of Brands and Preferences	Insights into the expectations and preferences that shape Generation Z’s interactions with brands.
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“...brand ignores these topics, it feels like they’re out of touch. But if they’re serious about it, it seems like they’re actually trying to make a difference, not just sell something.” (Gen1, 94-95)

“...brands tell stories, it feels way less salesy. It’s more like they’re sharing something with me, not just advertising.” (Gen2, 149-150)

“...different from regular ads, which often just focus on quick information or flashy visuals.” (Gen2, 160-161)

“...recognize us as a generation—take us seriously and not make fun of us or belittle our views.” (Gen2, 236-237)

“...huge audience with different needs compared to other generations. I think that’s super important, for brands to respect us in a way (laughs), if that makes sense?” (Gen2, 237-239)

“...traditional ads, I honestly just want to skip them. Like, the second they come on, I’m already reaching for the ‘skip’ button because they’re so predictable—it’s always the same

thing: ‘Buy this, it’s the best.’” (Gen3, 295-297)

“...catch my attention and make me want to keep watching.” (Gen3, 297-298)

“...only real chances to actually get to know a brand properly.” (Gen3, 316)

“...understanding the people and purpose behind it, and that makes such a difference.” (Gen3, 317)

“...brand really has a personality and uses that to make something that feels more like art than just advertising.” (Gen4, 462-463)

“...brands are building their own little worlds, and if that world is interesting or unique, I actually want to know more. Regular ads don’t usually do that for me—they’re just... there. But a well-done story can really pull you in. I’ll remember a brand that tells a good story, even if I’m not all that interested in the product itself.” (Gen4, 471-474)

“brands could explore creativity itself more—show the design process, where they get their inspiration, or even the art behind what they do.” (Gen4, 518-519)

“brand keeps things real and doesn’t try too hard.” (Genz5, 595)

“don’t just push the ‘perfect’ image but instead show the real value behind what they offer. If it’s too flashy, I’m kind of turned off. (...) But if there’s a practical message or something I can relate to, I’m listening.” (Genz5, 596-598)

“about being real, not fake, that would appeal to me. But there are limits to this—sometimes it feels like brands try too hard to fit into trends, and that can backfire. Some topics just don’t fit with a brand’s message and can come across as forced.” (Genz5, 674-677)

“topics like political conflicts or taking a stand on controversial issues, or even trying to capitalize on mental health. I just don’t think it’s right to commercialize some things. There was that scandal with an influencer promoting mental health with certain brands, and it didn’t sit right. Some topics should just stay out of brand storytelling.” (Genz5, 682-685)

“brands use protests in a story just to reach out to us as Gen Z, it doesn’t feel genuine. It feels like they’re not taking us seriously. Using protests or social movements as a storytelling element doesn’t feel right.” (Genz5, 690-692)

“focusing on Generation Z as the target group, it becomes particularly important to address them specifically. I think – no, I would say – one of the biggest mistakes in marketing is overlooking or underestimating this generation.” (Exp1, 739-742)

“brand has a deeper message or is simply trying to sell something. That’s why storytelling is so incredibly effective – it allows us to build a genuine connection and show that, as a brand, we stand for something meaningful, whether it’s environmental awareness, social responsibility, or cultural relevance.” (Exp1, 747-750)

“expect brands to share their values and beliefs, and storytelling enables us to do this in a way that traditional advertising just can’t achieve. (laughs)” (Exp1, 750-752)

“is maintaining authenticity while continuously staying innovative.” (Exp1, 913-914)

“want to know whether a brand genuinely lives its values. If we rely only on marketing clichés, we lose their attention immediately. Striking the balance between creativity and credibility is crucial but also challenging. It requires ideas that are fresh but at the same time don’t feel forced—it’s really a fine line to walk.” (Exp1, 915-918)

“their voices to be heard and to be an active part of the brand experience. Co-creation isn’t just a nice add-on for them—it’s almost expected.” (Exp1, 939-941)

“when they are locally or thematically relevant. Our experiences show that stories focusing on specific interests and values of subcultures resonate very well with Generation Z. For instance, we had a campaign heavily focused on sustainable consumption. This particularly appealed to those interested in environmental protection—and that’s quite a significant portion of Generation Z.” (Exp1, 946-950)

“Loyalty to a brand only exists if it meets their expectations. They especially value clear positioning. They want to be directly addressed.” (Exp1, 956-957)

“Customer loyalty is not only created by the product itself, but also by the experiences they associate with it.” (Exp2, 1084-1085)

“customers can contribute their own ideas and creativity, they feel directly connected to the brand and see it more as ‘their’ brand. (...) This sense of belonging and the desire to be part of something bigger is especially important to Generation Z.” (Exp2, 1085-1087)

“simply the expectations of marketing have risen enormously in recent years - and the generation certainly has something to do with that (laughs).” (Exp2, 1135-1137)

“demand transparency, honesty and, above all, that a brand stands for something - in other words, that it really has values that go beyond pure sales intentions. This generation is extremely good at scrutinizing things.” (Exp2, 1137-1139)

“One point that I find particularly important is this real-time feedback. I think Generation Z simply expects brands to respond to comments, likes and shares - and as quickly as possible. They want to feel that they are really being listened to. And the exciting thing is that when a story is well received, brands often realize this within minutes. This gives them the chance to respond immediately and adapt.” (Exp2, 1143-1147)

“credibility. I’d say it’s pretty obvious when a brand genuinely stands by its values or is just pretending to share them. (...) It is not enough to present diversity and sustainability superficially; the brand must actually live these values. Another obstacle is the ability to adapt quickly.” (Exp3, 1284-1287)

“expect a lot (laughs) but from my understanding I think they want to have a say and actively participate.” (Exp3, 1328-1329)

“is a sense of exclusivity and community. A “first look” or exclusive insights provided only to certain channels are excellent ways to make this target group feel like part of a special, selected group. When brands offer special previews or sneak peeks—be it a new product launch, behind-the-scenes content, or limited-access insights—they create a unique sense of closeness and connection. Feeling like they have ‘insider’ information before (...).” (Exp3, 1339-1345)

“exclusivity that Coca-Cola’s famous Christmas story has, which heralds the start of the holiday season every year. They manage to put viewers in a festive mood through its Christmas campaign, giving them the feeling of being part of a cross-generational ritual. This combination I think especially - Generation Z loves this kind of traditional storytelling, which recurs annually and acts as a kind of “kick-off” for the holidays.” (Exp3, 1345-1351)

“expects brands to be transparent and honest and to stand for more than just commercial success. (...) This generation wants to feel that a brand responds to their needs and expectations and genuinely lives its values. They expect real-time feedback and a certain degree of adaptability. A simple example: If Generation Z provides feedback on social media, they expect the brand to respond and, if necessary, adjust its storytelling approaches. For them,

it's about being perceived as active participants and feeling that their opinions and values are reflected in the brand's communication." (Exp3, 1358-1363)

"they can immediately tell if something feels too staged or artificial." (Exp4, 1387-1388)

"polished stories and perfectionism don't appeal to them. Instead, they value honesty and the willingness to show vulnerability. It's about sharing real challenges and clearly demonstrating what values a brand truly represents. Brands that communicate openly and authentically build trust much more quickly." (Exp4, 1388-1391)

"a brand stands by its values and is willing to admit mistakes or challenges. When a brand is open about these things, they feel a stronger connection compared to when everything is portrayed as perfect. Authenticity is simply the be-all and end-all for Gen Z." (Exp4, 1398-1400)

"Pepsi ad that tried to frame protests as a trend or the classic Victoria's Secret imagery with 'ideal' body types tend to repel them because they don't feel authentic and fail to meet the needs of this young audience. Also one crucial point is how mental health is addressed." (Exp4, 1416-1419)

"don't see themselves as just consumers but as part of the brand world." (Exp4, 1437)

"Gen Z watches closely to see if a brand's actions align with its statements. If brands take this seriously, it creates a bond that lasts in the long term." (Exp4, 1479-1481)

"everything is extremely fast-paced." (Exp4, 1491)

"also need to react quickly to trends while staying consistent, which is often a balancing act. Inconsistency or frequent value changes can significantly damage trust." (Exp4, 1492-1494)

"manage to stay true to their core values while creatively adapting their messages to current trends are usually the most successful." (Exp4, 1499-1500)

"Young people today value transparency and honesty from brands. They want to feel that their voice matters and that communication happens on equal footing. When they give feedback, they expect a genuine response and appreciate it when brands create space for dialogue. It's not just about being seen as customers but as partners." (Exp5, 1517-1520)

"brands, this means they have to try twice as hard." (Exp5, 1582)

"the ability to design a message that can be interpreted in different ways. Brands can achieve this by creating open narratives that appeal to a wide range of people in their own way. Alternatively, they can go the other route and make their content hyper-personalized—that also works very well." (Exp5, 1646-1648)

"segmentation. But not just on a traditional demographic level; rather, focusing on psychographic traits—like personal values, interests, or lifestyles. If brands take these subcultures within Generation Z into account, they can develop messages that are simultaneously individual and collectively relevant." (Exp5, 1649-1652)

"Campaigns that genuinely embrace diversity, rather than portraying it superficially, resonate much better. What I also find interesting is the approach through psychographic subgroups. These are not based on demographic traits like age or location but rather on values, lifestyles, and interests. (...) For example, there are the activists—young people who are deeply committed to issues like social justice, climate protection, or diversity. Brands like Patagonia or Ben & Jerry's excel at this because they take clear societal positions that directly appeal to this group. Another subgroup is the community seekers. These young people value social

connections and communities. Platforms like TikTok or Discord meet this need through interactive formats that foster a sense of belonging.” (Exp5, 1690-1697)

“Generation Z is also particularly sensitive to topics that hold emotional and personal significance for them – like mental health, climate change, or social justice. If brands address these issues superficially or simply use them for marketing purposes, it quickly leads to a loss of trust.” (Exp5, 1751-1753)

“Psychologically, this constitutes a genuine breach of trust because ethical expectations are not met. This generation demands that such issues are taken seriously and not just used as tools to boost sales.” (Exp5, 1754-1755)

“it’s vital to not only portray social and cultural diversity but also to live it authentically. Ignoring this diversity or using stereotypes is not just off-putting but can be perceived by this generation as actively harmful. Inclusive communication that credibly integrates different perspectives is therefore essential.” (Exp5, 1759-1762)

<b>OC: Key Elements for Effective Storytelling</b>	Examines the essential components and principles required for crafting impactful storytelling strategies.
<b>SC: Narrative Elements</b>	Exploration of narrative frameworks and storytelling components that resonate with Generation Z.

“Ooh, characters for sure! When there’s someone I can relate to or who feels real, it makes a huge difference. Like, if it’s a person dealing with something, even if it’s a small thing, it just feels... more interesting.” (Gen1, 34-36)

“I don’t think they always have to be real people. Like, I’m remembering this one ad... it was with this little imaginary creature who was really lonely because, like, it had spikes or something, and it couldn’t get any hugs. I can’t remember exactly, but yeah, that one really stuck with me.” (Gen1, 45-48)

“It was a hedgehog with human features. You could see emotions and reactions on its face, and that made the connection stronger, you know? You felt sympathy for it, and it was easy to relate to.” (Gen1, 52-54)

“drama or excitement—that’s perfect!” (Gen1, 60)

“Emotional also —it doesn’t have to make me cry, but if it makes me feel something, even a little, it’s done well. But I do need a happy ending, even if it’s a short story. If it’s emotional, it shouldn’t stay sad! A bit of realism with a twist, I guess?” (Gen1, 60-62)

“characters fascinate me because they’re what make the story feel real and alive.” (Gen2, 171)

“depth and emotion to the narrative in a way that feels tangible.” (Gen2, 172)

“character who’s relatable, I can’t help but think, ‘Wow, that could totally be me!’ It’s like they reflect parts of my own life or personality, and that connection makes the story so much more personal.” (Gen2, 172-174)

“character with a cool or unique style, they can be super inspiring—like someone you want to learn from or look up to. It doesn’t even have to be a person; it could be a fictional character or even an animal with human-like traits. As long as there’s a sense of emotion or personality, it’s captivating.” (Gen2, 175-177)

“diverse range of people in the story—like a mix of characters that represent different perspectives.” (Gen2, 190-191)

“setting of the story matters too, like if it’s in a place or situation that feels real to me. Or if the context just fits the story. I think it’s tough to reach everyone, but maybe showing different kinds of people in one story can help people see themselves in it. And just showing everyday conflicts is really relatable for me—I can identify with it more.” (Gen3, 329-332)

“It’s hard for me to connect if they just use celebrities, like Heidi Klum, (..) It doesn’t make sense to me, and I’m not sure how that connects to the brand.” (Gen3, 387-388)

“character who represents certain values, or maybe even seeing a culture (..) (Gen4, 479-480)

“unusual setting, an unexpected twist, or even a bit of humor that stands out.” (Gen5, 613-614)

“doesn’t have to be overly serious; sometimes a lighthearted or quirky tone makes the story even more memorable.” (Gen5, 614-615)

“emotions and characters are at the top of the list. When we tell a story with deep, well-developed characters who face conflicts and evolve, the audience – especially Generation Z – feels much more engaged and connected.” (Exp1, 791-793)

“Emotions like vulnerability or even imperfection can be incredibly powerful. When we create characters who face problems or moral dilemmas that Gen Z can relate to, we tap directly into their need for authenticity and depth.” (Exp1, 794-796)

“lots of small details or Easter eggs that makes it so engaging for them” (Exp1, 802)

“emotionally resonate with our customers and stand out from typical advertising messages.” (Exp2, 1006-1007)

“say identification figures are central.” (Exp2, 1018)

“Characters or real people telling a story work very well—especially when they feel authentic. Conflicts or challenges are also extremely effective because they create a certain drama that keeps attention. The story becomes a kind of journey that conveys a message at the end. The product doesn’t necessarily have to be in the spotlight—the framework is much more important.” (Exp2, 1018-1022)

“use of metaphors and symbolism in storytelling. I personally find this super exciting. Brands often use them to create deeper levels of meaning that are not immediately clear, but work on an emotional level. It’s about giving viewers the feeling that they themselves have discovered something meaningful in the story. (...) An example would be using colours symbolically - like a gradual change from darker to lighter tones to represent development or change, like overcoming challenges. Such subtle allusions are simply more modern and sophisticated. And they show that the brand takes its target group seriously by offering more than just flat advertising messages. I think this interplay of everyday heroes and deep symbolism is exactly what really appeals to Gen Z.” (Exp2, 1106-1113)

“‘plot twists’ work really well - moments that take the story in a completely unexpected direction. Gen Z loves that. They like it when they are surprised, when they experience a turning point in a story that makes them take a closer look.” (Exp3, 1198-1200)

“humour, ironic twists - that goes down really well with them. This generation is totally receptive to self-irony. Storytelling can be self-reflective, it can show that the brand doesn’t take itself and its own story too seriously. This creates a human connection.” (Exp3, 1200-1203)

“real people with real stories behind a brand.” (Exp4, 1392)

SC: Content Preference	Preferred content styles, tones, and thematic relevance for Generation Z.
<p>“into a little world or showing me something cool or real.” (Gen1, 14)</p> <p>“real-life issues or things that people my age care about. (...) Themes like friendship, motivation, and things about achieving something—that’s what matters most.” (Gen1, 86-87)</p> <p>“self-confidence, diversity, social issues.” (Gen1, 93)</p> <p>“character goes through some kind of transformation—maybe they solve a problem, overcome a challenge, or grow in some way. Watching that journey is so engaging because you start rooting for them. You want to see how it all plays out, and it feels like you’re experiencing it with them. It’s almost like the character invites you into their world, and suddenly, you’re not just watching a story; you’re part of it. (Gen2, 178-182)</p> <p>“– you get the vibe and the story in one go.” (Gen2, 246-247)</p> <p>“facing challenges that are relevant to today’s world, like environmental or social issues.” (Gen3, 326-327)</p> <p>“who’s genuinely working towards something good, and maybe even struggling along the way, is relatable.” (Gen3, 327-328)</p> <p>“address real issues, hands down.” (Gen3,385)</p> <p>“like one is for sure stress, especially with how fast everything moves today—social media, school, work, all of it. If a brand talks about that openly or supports mental health initiatives, it shows they actually get what we’re going through.” (Gen3, 406-408)</p> <p>“climate change. It’s something a lot of us care about because it’s literally our future. When brands take action on that.” (Gen3, 408-409)</p> <p>“meaningful message being shared, something deeper than just the product.” (Gen4, 481)</p> <p>“traditional story, it should have a clear plot and direction, with a beginning, middle, and end that all tie together. It should feel like it’s going somewhere.” (Gen4, 482-483)</p> <p>“imaginative stories, honestly. I’m less interested in really serious topics when it comes to brand stories—I prefer when brands get creative and take a fun approach. If a brand lets you interpret the story yourself, it’s way more engaging.” (Gen4, 487-489)</p> <p>“it focused on inner beauty, which is such an important message. And then it also addressed this super current issue about the extreme editing of photos.” (Gen4, 503-504)</p> <p>“creativity and how unexpected the story is.” (Genz5, 611)</p> <p>“Try to convey a specific message and let the brand or product be more of a supportive part, something that enhances the story rather than being the main focus.” (Genz5, 656-658)</p> <p>“affordability, quality, and maybe even sustainability.” (Genz5, 668)</p> <p>“Elements like nostalgia, diversity, and suspense could play a central role here.” (Exp1, 864-865)</p> <p>“honesty and transparency are essential for this target group.” (Exp1, 954)</p> <p>“‘body positivity’ or now also ‘body neutrality’. The younger generation totally supports these trends because they are about accepting the body as it is, beyond any idealised beauty standards. And brands that show real body images - without any pressure to be perfect, quite honestly - quickly gain trust..” (Exp3, 1232-1242)</p>	

“is minimalism - and this new ‘de-influencing’ trend fits in perfectly. Unlike classic influencing, where people are often encouraged to consume blindly, this is about consuming more consciously and not chasing every trend.” (Exp3, 1243-1248)

“through challenges. It’s just a great way to get Generation Z to participate. Brands can create challenges that are super easy to follow and then people share their posts under a certain hashtag. This creates a kind of community feeling and at the same time the brand story spreads organically on all kinds of platforms.” (Exp3, 1249-1254)

“personal founder or CEO stories. When founders or CEOs tell their own story - for example, how the brand came about or what is important to them personally - it immediately creates a connection. It shows that there are real people behind the brand, with real convictions. And that’s exactly what Generation Z really likes. They like it when they realise that a brand is not just some impersonal company, but that there are people who are passionate about it. That simply makes the brand more tangible, more credible.” (Exp3, 1254-1260)

“brands with a particularly broad spectrum of customer groups, it is often more effective to emphasise consumer stories. These stories create direct identification because the target group recognises itself in the real experiences of other consumers and thus perceives the brand as more approachable and versatile. Such stories strengthen the feeling that the brand is truly anchored in the everyday lives of its customers (...)” (Exp3, 1268-1273)

“there are brands that rely on strong brand equity and a clear purpose-orientation. For these brands, the founder or CEO story is often a more powerful means of reaching Generation Z. If a clear vision or values such as sustainability, social justice or credibility are communicated directly by the founders or senior management, the story will be remembered for longer. When younger generations connect with a brand, it’s not just about the products—it’s also about the values and beliefs that define the company.” (Exp3, 1273-1279)

“beauty of imperfection. Brands that show real, sometimes imperfect sides come across as more honest and approachable. These authentic moments build trust and make a brand tangible.” (Exp4, 1405-1407)

“addressed in a thoughtful, intelligent way without coming across as preachy or staged.” (Exp4, 1414)

“Instead of explicit political statements, young consumers expect brands to embody values like environmental and climate protection, equality, or inclusion without forcing them into advertising messages.” (Exp4, 1414-1416)

**SC:** Platforms and Formats

Evaluation of the platforms and media formats most effective in reaching this audience.

“It even showed up on my TikTok feed a few days ago, so it’s fresh in my mind.” (Gen1, 67-68)

“simply want to share it directly, because then it just feels like you’re really watching a show.” (Gen1, 78-79)

“YouTube. YouTube is good for longer stories or series, and I watch a lot there. On TikTok, I usually see brand stories made by influencers or content creators, but I’m not sure if that counts.” (Gen1, 97-98.)

“videos! Videos are just way more engaging, and it’s easier to get a vibe or a feeling from them.” (Gen1, 108-109)

“sometimes simpler stories are even better.” (Gen2, 227)

“smart if brands shared their stories on platforms where we’re active. Maybe take ads usually shown on YouTube or TV and shorten them for TikTok.” (Gen2, 236-238)

“gets the message across, it’s mostly through videos, and for me it is videos only.” (Gen2, 242-243)

“no big words or explanations; the images did all the talking. And what I found really clever was how the length of the campaign kind of symbolized life itself.” (Gen3, 354-356)

“poster campaign still counts as storytelling?” (Gen3, 368)

“the form of ads on TV.” (Gen3, 412)

“not really see long stories from brands on social media when I think about it.” (Gen3, 414)

“shared these stories directly on social channels.” (Gen3, 418)

“videos for sure, especially those documentary-style ones, like the ones Patagonia does—they’re super cool.” (Gen3, 433-434)

“Like with IKEA, you see that it doesn’t have to be in a video format to get a message across. They’ve done things with posters that really stick with you, and it’s not even something you’d expect at first. It’s just such a clever way to make you think or feel something without it being a typical ad.” (Gen3, 434-436)

“it’s by chance. It’s not like I’m actively searching for ads, right? (laughs) Mostly, it’s on TV or as an ad that plays before a YouTube video.” (Gen4, 525-526)

“on social media. Most ads there are just promotional posts—just product info or a slogan. I don’t really see full storytelling-style ads on social media (...)” (Gen4, 531-532)

“definitely. I mean, if I’m scrolling through Instagram or TikTok, I don’t want to see ads, obviously. (laughs) But at least on those platforms, you can skip the ads quickly. On TV, you’re kind of stuck.” (Gen4, 536-537)

“videos, for sure. They have the most impact because they pull you in with both the visuals and the sound, which makes the story feel more real and complete.” (Gen4, 555-556)

“shorter videos that get to the point quickly but still tell a compelling story. They’re just easier to watch and don’t lose your attention. Articles can work sometimes, but only if they really offer something interesting, like behind-the-scenes details or insights about the brand.” (Gen4, 557-559)

“I think it could work. There are these loops that some brands are using now, where the end of the video blends seamlessly back to the beginning, so you don’t realize you’re watching it again. I think that could be a good way to go.” (Gen5, 704-705)

“is the digital setup and interplay, which I would also consider part of narrative elements.

Visual stimulation is so important here. Let me give you an example – a video that reveals new details every time you watch it keeps the viewer engaged longer because there’s always more to discover, and it sparks curiosity.” (Exp1, 787-790)

“lot with TikTok or Instagram Reels. Videos that take up the full screen, show text directly within the video, and include features like comments, likes, and sharing – these really grab Gen Z’s attention.” (Exp1, 794-796)

“of creative possibilities—from live videos to interactive polls. In the storytelling process, they are not just channels but platforms for engagement and creating a sense of connection with the brand.” (Exp1, 954-956)

“visual design, in my opinion. Especially so-called jump cuts—those quick, unconventional cuts—are hugely popular. They make videos more dynamic, surprising, and often much more humorous. I think Generation Z particularly likes this style because it feels authentic, a bit imperfect, you know? It’s such a strong contrast to those classically polished transitions you see in traditional commercials.” (Exp2, 1018-1022)

“And then there are those sudden, unexpected changes in the visuals. These could be surprises like abrupt color changes, quick perspective shifts (...) (Exp2, 1023-1026)

“music, of course—you can’t forget music, especially songs that are currently viral. If a song is trending on platforms like TikTok, it gives the video a modern, fresh feel. If the beat or rhythm matches the story, it enhances the emotional impact even more. This connection between visuals and sound makes the whole thing more intense and captivating.” (Exp2, 1027-1030)

“TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are the main platforms we use to reach this generation. Each platform has its own unique style of storytelling, and we try to incorporate this into our strategy. (...) On TikTok, we focus on short, dynamic stories.” (Exp3, 1361-1364)

**OC:** Storytelling Reflecting Practices and Future Trajectories

This category investigates current practices in storytelling and explores emerging trends and future directions.

**SC:** Effective Advertising Messages

Highlighting elements necessary for creating persuasive and impactful advertising messages.

“...a way to get interested in something, but in a fun way.” (Gen1, 13)

“...about someone going through something or achieving something, that stays with me more than just a regular ad. When there’s a journey or some kind of struggle, it feels real, and I’m, like, invested. I actually don’t mind watching longer stories if they’re like that – they’re easier to remember and feel more personal.” (Gen1, 25-27)

“...Traditional ads are all about the product, like, ‘Buy this because it’s the best!’ But with brand stories, it’s different, more like... a journey or something relatable.” (Gen1, 21-23)

“...focus on topics that interest us, like sustainability, for instance.” (Gen2, 236)

“...it almost felt like a short TV show from when I was a kid. Even though it was animated, you could feel the emotions, and it was almost like watching a mini-series.” (Gen1, 77-79)

“...storytelling is kind of like making an experience out of something.” (Gen2, 144)

“...how it fits into life, like how I might actually use it or relate to it.” (Gen2, 145)

“...brand stories is how they can spark emotions or curiosity.” (Gen2, 154)

“...creating a memory instead of just showing you something.” (Gen2, 157)

“...feel fresh and relevant. If it’s realistic and touches on something I care about, like trends or style, it feels more personal.” (Gen2, 185-186)

“...Realness is a key because you want to feel like you can step into the story, and that only works if it feels real.” (Gen2, 188-189)

“...behind-the-scenes feel, like a peek into how things are made or the people behind the brand. And if they’re connecting with trends or showing a different side of life.” (Gen2, 225-226)

“...brands trying to use advertising in a way that brings people together around something meaningful, like a shared idea or goal.” (Gen3, 282-283)

“...when a story doesn’t feel overproduced or scripted. If it’s realistic, like showing the actual

impact of their actions or products, I'm much more engaged.” (Gen3, 338-339)

“...have a clear direction and message from the start, or else the storytelling doesn't really make sense.” (Gen3, 342-343)

“...being authentic and real.” (Gen3, 396)

“...acknowledging our problems and concerns in a serious way—that's really important!” (Gen3, 397)

“...it doesn't feel like typical marketing. Stories stand out to me when they're visually strong, you know, like they have a unique style or approach, or they take an unexpected angle—something that makes me pause and think for a moment.” (Gen4, 460-463)

“...story feels relevant to me.” (Gen4, 467)

“...big part of it is feeling seen—like finding myself in the story.” (Gen4, 475)

“...I think super serious themes don't always belong in brand storytelling; they can backfire if they're not handled carefully. And people might get frustrated if it feels too heavy.” (Gen4, 485-487)

“...When a brand tries to sell me a hero story that's only possible because of their product, it just feels fake if you know what I mean.” (Gen4, 516-517)

“...tells a story that's relatable or even useful, I pay attention. It's like I get to see the purpose behind what they're doing, which makes me feel a little more connected.” (Gen5, 600-601)

“...brand can surprise me or take a unique approach that I haven't seen before, that really grabs my attention.” (Gen5, 607)

“...’Wait, what's happening here? Is this even still an ad, or did my show just continue?’ That kind of surprise really grabs my attention. It can be done in so many ways, too—like if the ad starts with silence, and then suddenly there's a character who's really intriguing or unusual. Or when you see a story unfolding in a way you didn't anticipate. It's that sense of curiosity, like, ‘Where is this going?’ That's what keeps me watching.” (Gen5, 616-620)

“...I expect from a good story in general.” (Gen5, 631)

“...it straightforward and useful.” (Gen5, 651)

“...story should carry itself, with the brand amplifying the values or message being communicated.” (Gen5, 653)

“...I think storytelling is a great way to show a brand's entire identity, not just highlight one product.” (Gen5, cf.)

“...generation is super sensitised to this and immediately notices if it's not authentic or just comes across as a ‘compulsory exercise’.” (Exp2, 1085-1086)

“...challenge and surprise the generation. Really - they love surprises, twists and turns that don't follow the typical advertising path. That's also just what a brand has to do because they see so much and get so much input. It's really crucial to stand out.” (Exp3, 1187-1189)

“...direct involvement of the target group, for example via so-called ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ formats. I think they also - love being able to make decisions, and interactive storytelling formats allow them to actively shape.” (Exp3, 1200-12001)

“...play along’ directly or indirectly. By this I mean that people can tell their own story with the brand or a specific product.” (Exp3, 1203-1204)

“...Something like: ‘Do I have a story like the one I just saw in the advert?’ or ‘What was actually my first point of contact with this brand?’ It's really exciting to see how people reflect: ‘What products do I actually have from this brand at home?’ and ‘Do they make me feel the

same way as what is shown in the adverts?’ This is of course an ideal image, but it shows how brands can direct the attention of their target group to a deeper level - almost as if they were passing the ball back and saying: ‘Here, think about us for yourself.’” (Exp3, 1206-1209)

“...’Purpose-Driven Storytelling’. It’s not just about telling a story to get attention, but really representing a larger cause - such as environmental protection, social justice or diversity.” (Exp3, 1219-1220)

“...active involvement of the community. Instead of passively listening, many in this target group want to contribute and have an influence. Stories that are developed further through community contributions not only foster interaction but also create a deeper connection.” (Exp4, 1400-1402)

“...balance credibility with subtlety are particularly effective.” (Exp4, 1405)

“...Authenticity, interaction, and a genuine purpose are essential for them. If brands show that they want to make a positive impact on the world and keep their promises, then they’re on the right track with Gen Z.” (Exp4, 1477-1479)

“...create a strong emotional resonance. For Generation Z, this means that the content shouldn’t just be entertaining but must also convey meaning and purpose.” (Exp5, 1701-1702)

“...what this generation absolutely does not want to see – what might even repel them or cause them to view a brand negatively.” (Exp5, 1719-1720)

“...If brands fail to be sensitive or come across as dishonest or disrespectful, it can backfire quickly. A central issue arises when brands ignore or actively violate the values of this generation. Topics like inclusivity, equality, and social responsibility are not empty buzzwords for Generation Z; they are deeply rooted convictions. If brands disregard these or – worse – mock them, many in this generation perceive it as almost a personal attack. Psychologically, this leads to cognitive dissonance – the uncomfortable feeling when brand messages don’t align with personal beliefs or expectations. Particularly with issues like stereotypical portrayals or a lack of respect for diversity, brands risk not only rejection but also active pushback from this generation, such as boycotts.” (Exp5, 1718-1730)

“...become problematic when a condescending or mocking tone is used, especially if it’s aimed directly at Generation Z. Sure, they have a great sense of humor, but they are also very sensitive to whether that humor is respectful or comes across as dismissive. In psychology, this is called resonance experience – the feeling that a message ‘lands’ and feels authentic. If brands trivialize or exaggerate the problems or values of this generation – like mental health, activism, or equality – it often comes across as disrespectful.” (Exp5, 1731-1737)

“...they want to be taken seriously, even though they absolutely appreciate humor and self-irony. (...) The goal should be to strike a balance between levity and respect.” (Exp5, 1736-1737)

“...is making exaggerated promises or presenting completely unrealistic portrayals. High-gloss ads that project perfection or messages like ‘the only solution to all your problems’ are completely rejected by this generation. Psychologically, this is tied to their strong ability to critically evaluate content. Growing up in the digital age has given them direct access to information, allowing them to quickly verify claims. If brands make exaggerated or false promises, they risk not only losing credibility but also damaging their reputation in the long term.” (Exp5, 1736-1740)

**SC: Insights from Practice**

Expert insights, highlighting both successful and less effective storytelling approaches.

“...Patagonia tells these amazing stories about the environment and adventure – it’s not even about the products half the time, but you feel the brand’s vibe. After watching their stuff, I feel kind of empowered (laughs). They often show the founder and people supporting the cause, and that makes me feel good, like I want to do something too or be part of it, if you know what I mean?” (Gen2, 194-196)

“...the founder shares the reasons and motivation for starting the brand, it’s easier to understand the brand’s identity and why they act a certain way.” (Gen2, 203-204)

“...great storytelling is definitely Edeka. Especially around Christmas – I think every year they come out with something that’s super emotional and really well done. They always go all-in on storytelling, and in general, they use it a lot in their advertising. The one that stands out the most for me is that Christmas clip with the grandfather. It was really popular, and I thought it was incredibly well made.” (Gen3, 348-350)

“...the IKEA ad with the posters was really special too. They managed to tell a complete story just through images. It was about an emotional topic – from birth to death – basically showing an entire life in different phases. What I loved about it was how visual and simple it was.” (Gen3, 352-354)

“...There were no big words or explanations; the images did all the talking. And what I found really clever was how the length of the campaign kind of symbolized life itself. You felt like you were going on this journey, but it didn’t feel like a typical ad.” (Gen3, 355-357)

“...part of real life, like that IKEA one that’s just so relatable. Or stories that talk about themes like family or friendship and have characters that are relatable.” (Gen3, 382-383)

“...you feel connected to the characters. If IKEA, for example, tries to tell me that everyday life with their furniture is better with someone like Heidi Klum, it’s a bit weird (laughs).” (Gen3, 389-390)

“...Patagonia does—they’re super cool. (Gen3, 434-437.)

“...Love comes to mind. I remember they recently did this big BeReal campaign that was pretty cool.” (Gen3, cf.)

“...is that Disney ad with the bird—or wait, I think it was actually a duck. It sees a Disney character for the first time and then dreams of flying. That one was so well done. It really stuck with me because it was so emotional and beautifully made. I’m just thinking about it now, and it’s such a good example of how storytelling can really pull you in. It wasn’t even about selling anything directly—it was just a powerful story that made you feel something. And I would also say that the story simply has to seem real. Even if it doesn’t show real people, you have to be able to empathize somehow.” (Gen5, 622-625)

“...Hmm (...) I think there was an ad from Edeka that I remember well. It was their Christmas ad from two years ago. It was just this really emotional story, and it was really well done. I can still remember it clearly.” (Gen5, 633-635)

“...The Edeka ad, it was just really emotionally engaging. You just wanted to keep watching, and everything came together so well—the music, the story, and it matched the Christmas season perfectly.” (Gen5, 639-640)

“...The story itself was in the spotlight, and the values it showed—family, togetherness, the Christmas season—were just supported by Edeka. The brand didn’t overpower the message but instead enhanced it by providing the Christmas meal, so the brand felt more like a part of the story and not the main focus.” (Gen5, 645-647)

“...with that Edeka ad—it wasn’t just about their products but about the values the brand wants to show to customers. I think that strengthens the brand’s image more than just focusing on a single product.” (Gen5, 656-657)

“...that Pepsi ad with Kendall Jenner, where they used protests as a theme? It did not go over well (laughs). I could show it to you later if you want. People on social media were really upset, and Pepsi ended up apologizing publicly.” (Gen5, 686-688)

“...Aldi Süd’s current storytelling ad is a really great example of an advertisement that addresses its target audience in an outstanding way. The campaign was designed as a three-part story ad format, and it was super clever. They even announced it in advance with a short teaser spot that said, ‘These stories are coming soon.’” (Exp1, 805-808)

“...The parts were released piece by piece, which, of course, kept the excitement high. A special focus was placed on personalized storytelling. They included real users—people who have been using the brand for years—and showed how the products are a central part of their lives.” (Exp1, 808-811)

“...Beautiful because the stories were integrated into the everyday lives of families, with completely different personalities and backgrounds, to showcase diversity. Nostalgia also played a big role. The message was clear: ‘Look at how long this brand has been a part of your life.’” (Exp1, 811-813)

“...The products themselves were incorporated in various ways. Sometimes they appeared only at the end of the story to maintain suspense, sometimes they were subtly integrated, and in some cases, they even played a key role in driving the plot forward.” (Exp1, 814-815)

“...Another strong aspect was the call-to-action: with the hashtag #TellUsYourAldiStory, people were encouraged to participate actively. This, of course, boosted interaction and made the campaign even more personal.” (Exp1, 817-818)

“...And then there were the technical details. Each spot was under 1:40 minutes, which is perfect for the attention span on social media. They played a lot with perspectives, changing camera angles, and sounds, and even the sound design was super cleverly used—sometimes loud, sometimes soft, depending on the mood. It was truly a successful mix of suspense, emotions, and genuine connection, which is exactly why the ad worked so well.” (Exp1, 820-822)

“...suspense in their stories. They manage to keep the product in the background rather than forcing it into the spotlight, subtly integrating it into the narrative—sometimes only at the end of the story or in a way where the product becomes the key to solving a problem. This keeps the story at the forefront, making the message more lasting.” (Exp1, 837-839)

“...goal might be to convey a message that says, ‘Our brand has been part of your life and family for years.’ With this guiding idea, the stories would then be implemented, ensuring that they authentically reflect the values and aspirations of the target audience.” (Exp1, 861-862)

“...our company, we work a lot with micro-influencers. These aren’t usually huge accounts but smaller ones that are very well-known in their niches. These can be areas like sustainability, veganism, or even local topics. And we use these individuals to integrate our products into

their stories, for example, through what’s called a “haul.” They unpack the products, share their thoughts on them, and it all feels very authentic because it stays in their style.” (Exp2, 1039-1042)

“...we launched an initiative where our customers could submit their own recipes created with our products. We not only shared the best recipes on our social media channels but also highlighted some in our stores. The feedback was amazing—people were incredibly excited to be part of our brand and to be recognized. For Generation Z, this is particularly important because they want to actively contribute their own experiences and ideas. They don’t just want to be consumers; they want to be, I would say, ‘active-creators’—and, of course, we leverage that.” (Exp2, 1053-1055)

“...was rather indirect. We didn’t use storytelling as the central focus, but more to accompany the content, so to speak. The point was that we wanted to create the framework with the story of our brand—a background, so to speak, that embeds the user-generated content. We tried to subtly integrate the stories of our brand into the context without being too intrusive. It was more a case of the story running through the content like a common thread that links everything together. This allowed us to communicate our values on the one hand, while at the same time placing the user’s content more in the foreground.” (Exp2, 1064-1068)

“...supermarkets are doing an excellent job with storytelling. Especially in recent years, they’ve really been at the forefront, and you can tell they’ve totally understood it. Since I received the questions in advance, I did a bit of research and watched a few of their spots. And honestly, so many of them have stuck in my mind. I think that’s a great sign when you can still remember them weeks later.” (Exp4, 1439-1442)

**SC:** Future Directions and Generational Shifts

Compilation of anticipated shifts in storytelling as Generation Z matures and new trends emerge.

“...well, I think stories get made indirectly by influencers, in a way. Like, they’ll talk about how they use the product in their daily life, or sometimes they tell a full story, like a ‘day in my life’ where the product just fits into their routine. So, it’s a kind of everyday story... or, like, if they do a ‘get ready with me,’ they’ll use a brand’s product, and it’s naturally included.” (Gen1, 102-104)

“...like they’re standing for something more than just selling clothes. They highlight big issues, like climate change, and it feels like the brand really has a purpose. And honestly, I think that’s what makes these stories so memorable for me. They show the full founder story, you know? Like, you get to see how it all started and the reasons behind it. It’s almost like you’re part of the journey right from the beginning. I think that’s definitely what makes these stories stick with me.” (Gen2, 212-215)

“...yeah, that is definitely the case for me.” (Gen2, 221)

“...it’s harder to trust them or feel connected.” (Gen3, 312)

“...influencers could probably produce stories, and some already do, actually. They use storytelling elements and create a story around a brand. The influencers end up being the main characters in the story, if that makes sense.” (Gen3, 423-424)

“...especially for people who really trust their favorite influencers. When a product is woven into a good story, it really works.” (Gen3, 429-430)

“...like it if brands tapped into new trends or used humor. But it has to feel genuine—not like they’re trying too hard. Characters who reference current trends, pop culture, or even memes make it feel like the brand understands digital culture. It’s like they ‘get it,’ you know?” (Gen4, 509-510)

“...definitely. I mean, if I’m scrolling through Instagram or TikTok, I don’t want to see ads, obviously. (laughs) But at least on those platforms, you can skip the ads quickly. On TV, you’re kind of stuck.” (Gen4, 537-539)

“...but then the story would have to start off really strong and catchy because I skip an ad as soon as I realize it’s an ad. So, the brand would have to stand out somehow.” (Gen4, 544-545)

“...maybe with a line or a word that grabs me, something that makes me feel called out or even a bit caught off guard. Something direct or personal, you know? Or it could even be a situation in the story that makes me wonder where it’s going. Like, if I’m curious or wondering what’s happening next, I’d probably keep watching. Something with a moral or that appeals to human nature could work.” (Gen4, 549-551)

“...massive importance in recent years, especially when it comes to engaging a target audience and creating real impact.” (Exp1, 730-731)

“...a big trend is transmedia storytelling. I can briefly explain this—it means that brands try to tell their stories across multiple platforms, with each platform contributing its unique way of deepening the story.” (Exp1, 870-872)

“...a company could release an exciting short film on YouTube that tells the main plot, while Instagram Stories provide behind-the-scenes insights, and the characters interact ‘independently’ on TikTok. This way, brands create a real network of content that together tells a more comprehensive story. I think they also like very much—immersing themselves in different facets of a story creates a strong, multi-dimensional connection to the brand for this audience.” (Exp1, 872-874)

“...is co-creation—that is, involving customers and the community in the stories. (laughs) This generation has a strong need for authenticity and wants to feel like part of the brand world. When invited to create their own content, help shape challenges, or contribute opinions to the development of a product or campaign, they feel more connected to the brand. There’s truly nothing more authentic and genuine than the voices and experiences of the customers themselves, and the trust and emotional bond (...).” (Exp1, 878-881)

“...diversity in the visual worlds we create. (...) values advertising that authentically and inclusively showcases people from different ethnic backgrounds, genders, body shapes, and abilities. They have high expectations for brands to present themselves as open and diverse, and they can immediately sense when something feels superficial or forced.” (Exp1, 884-886)

“...brands increasingly participate in viral trends and challenges on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. This means creatively picking up on existing trends and contributing their own content to become part of the trend culture. For instance, if a brand’s video participates in a popular challenge and feels authentic, it quickly becomes a talking point because it resonates with the language and lifestyle of Generation Z.” (Exp1, 887-891)

“...actively involved, to help shape and experience what a brand stands for. (laughs) I think—or rather, I’d say—these immersive elements are tailor-made for this generation because they allow them to understand stories through their own experiences instead of passively observing them as spectators.” (Exp1, 897-899)

“...is through non-linear storytelling. Gen Z loves content that doesn’t follow a chronological order but instead makes them actively think along. Brands could tell their stories in the form of puzzles or fragments that the viewers have to piece together themselves. This not only increases engagement but also addresses the desire for interactivity.” (Exp1, 916-920)

“...short, dynamic formats on social media. Platforms like TikTok or Instagram Reels force us to tell stories in just a few seconds or under 1:30—and that fits perfectly with Generation Z. It challenges us to be more creative and precise.” (Exp1, 921-923)

“...inviting users to contribute their own content, which is then embedded into the larger story, works exceptionally well. This not only makes the story more diverse but also makes the brand feel more approachable.” (Exp1, 923-925)

“...there’s still so much potential in using storytelling as advertising. Not all possibilities have been fully explored yet. I’m particularly thinking about producing stories through influencers or user-generated content.” (Exp1, 957-959)

“...influencers have an incredibly authentic connection with their followers. When they are integrated into a brand’s story, it has a massive impact. (laughs) They are essentially ‘narrators on behalf of the brand,’ but in a way that feels organic and less commercial. And then, of course, there’s the topic of influencers—(laughs)—they’ve obviously become incredibly relevant in recent years, and I can understand why. I think when influencers share their own experiences with a brand or creatively embody its philosophy, it creates a deeper connection. Especially with Generation Z, we see that they often trust recommendations from people they perceive as authentic more than traditional advertising.” (Exp1, 963-970)

“...important element is user-generated content. When consumers share their own experiences, whether through reviews, videos, or posts, it provides a genuine and unfiltered perspective. This content enriches the brand story and makes it more vibrant.” (Exp1, 971-973)

“...when both are combined—influencers and user-generated content. For example, a brand could launch a challenge where influencers and customers share their own contributions, which are then embedded into a larger story.” (Exp1, 974-976)

“...influencers today are so much more than just simple brand ambassadors. They tell their stories from their own perspectives, and if that fits well with the brand, it feels completely natural—like they’re simply a part of the brand world.” (Exp2, 1036-1038)

“...was rather indirect. We didn’t use storytelling as the central focus, but more to accompany the content, so to speak. The point was that we wanted to create the framework with the story of our brand - a background, so to speak, that embeds the user-generated content. We tried to subtly integrate the stories of our brand into the context without being too intrusive. It was more a case of the story running through the content like a common thread that links everything together. This allowed us to communicate our values on the one hand, while at the same time placing the user’s content more in the foreground.” (Exp2, 1063-1067)

“...transmedia storytelling. These are stories that span several platforms, with each platform showing a different aspect of the story. That’s going down really well at the moment because it’s simply more varied and encourages people.” (Exp2, 1089-1092)

“...this trend towards ‘everyday heroes.’ Brands are increasingly focussing on authentic, down-to-earth characters - people who overcome normal challenges and become everyday heroes in the process. This is extremely appealing to Generation Z because they can identify more with such realistic characters than with the ‘perfect’ figures we used to see in adverts. This message,

that each of us can perform small heroic deeds, really strikes a chord with the times and creates an emotional connection to the brand.” (Exp2, 1091-1096.)

“...absolutely, but it has to suit the brand.” (Exp2, 1112)

“...trends, it must not seem forced. I think this target group recognises incredibly quickly whether a brand is really part of this culture or just trying to belong to it. A positive example is a TikTok campaign that we recently realised. But I think it always has to be weighed up carefully, because a poorly implemented trend can just as easily damage the image.” (Exp2, 1113-1116)

“...so-called curiosity content. This is content in which the brand is not initially in the foreground - especially in the first few seconds. This approach is less intrusive and allows the story to run without a recognisable advertising message. This way, viewers do not have the feeling of being immediately exposed to a classic advert. (...) Attention is more likely to be attracted by an exciting, humorous or emotional scene that fits well with the respective platform and the viral trend. And I think when the brand appears at the end or subtly in the background, it feels less like an advert and more like part of the experience.” (Exp2, 1116-123)

“...A/B testing also plays a major role here. Brands can test different versions of a story and see directly which one is better received. This data then helps to adapt content specifically to the preferences of the target group. And this is exactly what Generation Z appreciates: brands that are flexible, evolve and respond to feedback instead of sticking rigidly to a fixed plan.” (Exp2, 1141-1144)

“...’unfinished’ story that evolves over time and is influenced by the reactions of the target audience. This creates the feeling for Gen Z that they are part of the brand’s development and can even influence its course.” (Exp3 1181-1183)

“...group through polls or surveys on social media. Some brands are experimenting with letting users determine the next ‘episode’ of their story. This gives Generation Z the feeling of really being part of the brand because they can help shape their own ‘hands-on experience’.” (Exp3, 1213-1216)

“...this creates a kind of community feeling and at the same time the brand story spreads organically on all kinds of platforms. TikTok, Instagram - this content virtually jumps from one platform to the next. It’s this transmedia storytelling that fits perfectly with how Gen Z consumes and shares content.” (Exp3, 1245-1248)

“...brand needs to treat its story almost like a series that is constantly evolving based on audience feedback.” (Exp3, 1283)

“...brands have a lot to gain by embracing viral trends, but there are definitely pitfalls.” (Exp3, 1290)

“...create a ‘build-up phase’ where the brand remains almost invisible and the content itself attracts attention. For example, some brands launch videos in which the branding only becomes visible after the first few seconds, so that the audience is drawn to the story without having the feeling of being drawn into a classic advertising message. (...) The branding should ideally be integrated organically into the story and not take centre stage - the brand should only appear at the end to create a subtle connection that feels more like a discovery than a commercial break. Another trend that comes to mind is platform-specific storytelling. Each social media platform has its own style and type of storytelling that Generation Z expects. On TikTok, for example, humorous short clips or creative challenges are particularly suitable because the platform

thrives on fast, entertaining content. On Instagram, on the other hand, more spontaneous, informal content via stories works very well, as this platform has a more visual, aesthetic focus.” (Exp3, 1292-1305)

“...another point is that brands can try to guide their target group from one platform to the next by working with specific hashtags or interactive features to create a kind of ‘cross-platform storyline’. This allows brands to engage their audience on one platform and motivate them to continue following the story on another platform through targeted hashtags or teasers.” (Exp3, 1305-1308)

“...use of ‘swipe’ functions on Instagram. Here, brands can develop chapter-like stories where the narrative continues through each swipe. This type of storytelling keeps the audience engaged and allows for a continuous, almost episodic structure that is particularly well received. Interactive experiences that are easy to engage with and keep people hooked until the end are exactly what this generation loves. (..) This method gives brands the opportunity to tell their stories in small, easily digestible bites, which fits in particularly well with the TikTok culture.” (Exp3, 1310-1317)

“...like BeReal are very popular because they encourage exactly that: snapshots that are real and show everyday life as it truly is. On platforms like Instagram and TikTok, hashtags like #NoFilter or #RealLife are becoming more common, where everyday moments are shared without much embellishment. (Exp4, 1418-1424)

“...collaborative storytelling is a huge trend right now! The concept is so exciting because brands actively involve their target audience, giving them the opportunity to contribute content or develop the story further with their own input. This fits perfectly with the mentality of Gen Z—they don’t just want to be spectators; they want to feel like part of the brand and actively participate. Trends themselves are an interesting topic with Gen Z.” (Exp4, 1454-1458)

“...follows so-called microtrends, which develop particularly quickly on TikTok and disappear just as fast. Trends like #BookTok, which makes books go viral, or currently popular topics like the Dubai chocolate or Crumble Cookies from the USA, showcase the diverse interests and the speed at which Gen Z picks up and shares new trends. I think it’s incredibly difficult for brands to react to these trends so quickly. These microtrends are only really suitable for a brand if the brand can implement them quickly and without too much effort. Otherwise, they often don’t align well with the brand concept.” (Exp4, 1458-1464)

“...the interest is massive.” (Exp4, 1503)

“...share their ideas and contribute their perspectives. (...) Challenges and hashtag campaigns are particularly successful because they allow Gen Z to create their own content and identify with the brand. Brands like Nike or Adidas use these opportunities brilliantly, creating a kind of ‘collective brand story’ that is driven by the community.” (Exp4, 1504-1506)

“...as they age, long-term perspectives like financial security, health, and personal development will take precedence. Brands will also need to address topics like sustainability in everyday life, mental resilience, and work-life balance. Another interesting aspect is that the generation may become less receptive to trends and hype as their cognitive self-regulation develops further. They may increasingly focus on substance and long-term values rather than fleeting trends. This is where the concept of long-term engagement comes into play: brands that can not only create short-term excitement but also remain relevant through periods of change will be more successful.” (Exp5, 1776-1783)

Appendix G: Final Coding Guide

<b>Category</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Coding Rule</b>	<b>Anchor Examples</b>
<b>OC: Decoding Generation Z</b>	<i>These categories are considered overarching categories.</i>	<i>These categories are considered overarching categories.</i>	<i>These categories serve as overarching categories.</i>
Characteristics and Distinctive Traits of Generation Z	Compilation of the defining attributes, behavioral patterns, and digital orientation of Generation Z.	The coding process focused on identifying references to distinctive generational traits, such as independence or digital affinity, and their connection to societal influences shaping these attributes.	“...having a shorter attention span, these surprise moments really speak to them.” (Exp2, 1035-1036) “...generation is constantly online and expects brands to be able to react” (Exp3, 1287-1289)
Expectations of Brands and Preferences	Insights into the expectations and preferences that shape Generation Z’s interactions with brands.	Assign segments mentioning what Generation Z expects from brands or their expressed preferences for specific attributes.	“brand keeps things real and doesn’t try too hard.” (Genz5, 595) “...recognize us as a generation—take us seriously and not make fun of us or belittle our views.” (Gen2, 236-237)
<b>OC: Key Elements for Effective Storytelling</b>	<i>These categories are considered overarching categories.</i>	<i>These categories are considered overarching categories.</i>	<i>These categories serve as overarching categories.</i>
Narrative Elements	Exploration of storytelling components that resonate with Generation Z.	Segments were coded when they addressed storytelling elements such as narrative structure, character development.	“I don’t think they always have to be real people. Like, I’m remembering this one ad... it was with this little imaginary creature (..)” (Gen1, 45-48)

Content Preference	Preferred content styles, tones, and thematic relevance for Generation Z.	Segments were coded if they referred to preferred content types or formats (e.g., videos, interactive content) linked to Generation Z's	"imaginative stories, honestly. I'm less interested in really serious topics when it comes to brand stories (..) " (Gen4, 487-489)
Platforms and Formats	Evaluation of the platforms and media formats most effective in reaching this audience.	Assign segments referring to platforms and content delivery methods favored by Generation Z.	"the form of ads on TV." (Gen3, 412) "not really see long stories from brands on social media when I think about it." (Gen3, 414)
<b>OC: Storytelling Reflecting Practices</b>	<i>These categories are considered overarching categories.</i>	<i>These categories are considered overarching categories.</i>	<i>These categories serve as overarching categories.</i>
Effective Advertising Messages	Effective method of delivering the message through storytelling is discussed.	Assign segments highlighting elements of effective advertising that resonate with Generation Z.	"...Generation Z responds to trustworthiness and real stories." (Exp1, 738-739) "...to develop stories directly inspired by the real lives of customers." (Exp1, 852)
Insights from Practice	Expert insights, highlighting both successful and less effective storytelling approaches.	Segments were coded when experts began providing detailed examples of storytelling, if they highlighted both positive and negative aspects	"...the founder shares the reasons and motivation for starting the brand" (Gen2, 203-204) "...great storytelling is definitely Edeka. Especially around Christmas" (Gen3, 348-350)
Future Directions and Generational Shifts	Compilation of anticipated shifts in storytelling as Generation Z matures and new trends emerge.	Coding followed two rules: 1. If experts identified emerging trends in storytelling approaches, and 2. If references to generational shifts affecting storytelling practices were included.	"...intriguing point is the so-called 'digital fatigue,' which is already noticeable among many young people. Brands might increasingly turn to platforms and formats that allow for less intensive but deeper interactions." (Exp5, 1792-1794)