



Livestreaming and Consumer Engagement in Generation Z

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รับบทความ: 23 มกราคม 2569; แก้ไขบทความ 25 พฤษภาคม 2569; ตอรับบทความ: 4 มิถุนายน 2569

Received: January 23, 2026; Revised: May 25, 2026; Accepted: June 4, 2026

Abstract

Livestreaming has become a strategically important digital communication tool that transforms how firms interact with consumers and create business value. Unlike traditional digital media, livestreaming enables real-time interaction, heightened social presence, and personalized communication, making it especially relevant for Generation Z consumers. This article examines livestreaming from both managerial and theoretical perspectives by integrating Media Richness Theory, Social Presence Theory, the Theory of Media Synchronicity, and Consumer Engagement Theory to explain how livestreaming influences consumer engagement and business performance. A conceptual framework is proposed that illustrates how livestream interactivity builds trust through parasocial interaction and source credibility, enhances multidimensional consumer engagement, and leads to improved performance outcomes moderated by contextual factors such as product type and platform characteristics. The article also addresses the potential dark side of livestreaming, including information overload and consumer vulnerability, and offers practical implications for managers alongside specific directions for future empirical research related to Generation Z markets.

Keywords: Livestreaming; Generation Z; Consumer Engagement; Business Performance; Digital Communication; Parasocial Interaction

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the communication landscape, enabling firms to interact with consumers through increasingly immersive and interactive media (Yadav & Pavlou, 2014). Digital platforms now allow organizations to move beyond one-way communication toward dialogic and relational forms of engagement. Among these developments, livestreaming has emerged as a prominent real-time digital communication modality that integrates audiovisual content with synchronous audience interaction (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018).



Livestreaming platforms such as TikTok Live, YouTube Live, and Instagram Live have normalized real-time broadcasting as a core marketing and engagement channel. These platforms enable immediate feedback, visibility, and social interaction, making them particularly attractive to younger consumers (Sun et al., 2019). As a result, livestreaming has become an increasingly important tool for firms seeking to build relationships, convey authenticity, and stimulate engagement in digital environments.

Generation Z, commonly defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, represents a digitally native cohort with distinct media consumption habits and communication expectations (Priporas et al., 2017). Unlike preceding generations such as Millennials, who adopted digital technologies during adolescence, Generation Z has been immersed in mobile-first, algorithm-driven media environments from birth, resulting in fundamentally different expectations regarding immediacy, interactivity, and content authenticity (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Dimock, 2019). Research suggests that this generation values authenticity, immediacy, and interactive experiences, and tends to respond less favorably to traditional, one-directional advertising formats (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Livestreaming aligns closely with these preferences by enabling spontaneous interaction and real-time social connection.

Despite the growing managerial relevance of livestreaming, academic research remains fragmented and lacks systematic integration between communication theory and management perspectives (Sun et al., 2019). Specifically, existing studies tend to apply individual theories such as Media Richness Theory or Social Presence Theory in isolation, without examining how these theoretical mechanisms interact to produce engagement outcomes in real-time digital environments. Furthermore, classical communication theories developed for asynchronous or semi-synchronous media have not been critically evaluated for their applicability to fully synchronous, audience-driven modalities like livestreaming (Dennis et al., 2008). This article addresses these gaps by proposing an integrated conceptual framework that synthesizes Media Richness Theory, Social Presence Theory, the Theory of Media Synchronicity, and Consumer Engagement Theory to explain how livestreaming influences consumer engagement and business performance in Generation Z markets. The article contributes to the literature by articulating the theoretical hierarchy among these constructs, identifying moderating conditions and boundary limitations, and offering testable propositions for future empirical research.

Main Contents

Conceptualizing Livestreaming as a Digital Communication Modality

Livestreaming refers to the real-time transmission of audiovisual content via internet-based platforms that enable synchronous interaction between content creators and audiences (Cai & Wohn, 2019). Unlike traditional broadcast media, livestreaming supports two-way communication through interactive features such as live chat, reactions, polls, and virtual gifting (Hamilton et al., 2014). These affordances allow viewers to actively participate in the communication process rather than passively consume content.

As a communication modality, livestreaming combines elements of mass communication and interpersonal interaction. Firms can reach large audiences while simultaneously creating a sense of immediacy and perceived intimacy (Marriott & Williams, 2018). This hybrid structure differentiates livestreaming from other digital formats, such as pre-recorded videos or static social media posts, which lack real-time interaction.

Beyond its technical features, livestreaming can be understood as a distinctive digital communication modality characterized by three categories of affordances. First, temporal affordances refer to the simultaneity of message production and reception, eliminating the delay inherent in asynchronous media and enabling meanings to be co-constructed dynamically through continuous audience feedback (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Second, social affordances encompass the visibility of audience participation, the co-presence of viewers and hosts, and the relational warmth conveyed through conversational interaction, all of which contribute to a heightened sense of community and social connection (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). Third, functional affordances include platform-specific tools such as real-time commenting, emoji reactions, virtual gifting, and gamified elements that structure participation and incentivize engagement behaviors (Hamilton et al., 2014). This categorization moves beyond a mere listing of features toward a systematic framework for understanding how livestreaming's communicative properties operate across different dimensions.

The co-construction of meaning in livestreaming deserves particular attention. Drawing on semiotic perspectives, the feedback loop between hosts and audiences does not merely transmit information but actively alters the message in real time (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Viewer comments can redirect content focus, shift communicative tone, and reshape relational dynamics, making livestreaming an inherently adaptive communication environment. From a managerial perspective, this requires a shift from message control toward interaction orchestration (Yadav & Pavlou, 2014). Firms must facilitate live social exchanges rather than simply deliver predesigned content. These characteristics make livestreaming particularly suitable for digitally fluent audiences such as Generation Z, who expect participatory rather than broadcast-style communication.

Theoretical Foundations

1) Media Richness Theory

Media Richness Theory proposes that communication effectiveness depends on a medium's ability to transmit multiple cues, enable immediate feedback, and support personal focus (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Rich media are especially effective for reducing ambiguity and facilitating understanding in complex communication contexts.

Livestreaming can be classified as a highly rich medium because it integrates audiovisual communication with real-time interaction (Dennis et al., 2008). The presence of visual cues, vocal tone, and immediate audience feedback enhances message clarity and supports relational communication, making livestreaming particularly effective for engagement-oriented communication strategies. However, it is important to recognize that media richness is not solely an inherent property of the medium. For digitally native users such as Generation Z, the perceived richness of a communication channel is influenced by prior experience, platform familiarity, and individual media competencies (Dennis et al., 2008). This suggests that the relationship between media richness and engagement outcomes may be contingent upon user characteristics rather than universally determined by the medium itself.

2) Social Presence Theory

Social Presence Theory emphasizes the extent to which a communication medium allows users to perceive others as psychologically present (Short et al., 1976). Media that convey warmth, immediacy, and sociability tend to enhance users' sense of connection and involvement.

Livestreaming enhances social presence through live video, conversational language, and interactive affordances such as comments and reactions (Biocca et al., 2003). These features foster a sense of co-presence between hosts and viewers, increasing perceived closeness and relational intensity in digital interactions. Notably, high social presence does not universally lead to positive engagement outcomes. For some Generation Z consumers, particularly those experiencing digital fatigue or information overload, elevated social presence may feel intrusive or demanding, potentially leading to avoidance rather than engagement (Cao et al., 2021). This dual-edged nature of social presence warrants careful consideration in both theory and practice.

3) Consumer Engagement Theory

Consumer engagement refers to the degree of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment that consumers develop through their interactions with a brand, extending beyond isolated transactions to encompass ongoing, value-creating relationships between consumers and firms (Brodie et al., 2011). Engagement reflects a dynamic and interactive process in which

consumers actively participate in shaping brand-related experiences rather than passively receiving marketing messages.

Livestreaming facilitates consumer engagement by enabling real-time participation, co-creation, and immediate feedback, thereby transforming audiences from passive viewers into active contributors (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Through live interaction, consumers can ask questions, express opinions, and influence content direction, which enhances involvement and sustains interaction over time. These engagement mechanisms are further strengthened by livestreaming's technological affordances, which combine rich media cues and heightened social presence.

4) Theoretical Synthesis: An Integrated Hierarchy

From an integrated theoretical perspective, Media Richness Theory, Social Presence Theory, and Consumer Engagement Theory do not operate in parallel but rather form a sequential and hierarchical relationship. This article proposes that media richness functions as an antecedent condition: livestreaming's capacity to transmit multiple cues and enable immediate feedback establishes the communicative foundation upon which social presence is built. Social presence, in turn, acts as a mediating mechanism through which the perceived psychological closeness between hosts and viewers translates into engagement behaviors. Consumer engagement theory then captures the outcome dimension, describing how cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investments emerge from these mediated interactions (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014).

Additionally, the Theory of Media Synchronicity (Dennis et al., 2008) offers a more contemporary lens than classical Media Richness Theory for understanding livestreaming. Media Synchronicity Theory distinguishes between convergence processes (developing shared understanding) and conveyance processes (transmitting new information), arguing that different communication tasks require different levels of synchronicity. Livestreaming is uniquely positioned because it supports high synchronicity for convergence, enabling real-time consensus-building and emotional alignment, while simultaneously conveying rich product information through demonstrations. This dual capability may explain why livestreaming is particularly effective for Generation Z, who process synchronous information differently from previous generations due to their multitasking media habits and preference for immediate feedback loops (Dennis et al., 2008; Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

These theories illustrate how livestreaming's technological features shape psychological states such as involvement and trust, which in turn stimulate engagement behaviors and influence performance outcomes. However, the classical theories also reveal potential contradictions: whereas Media Richness Theory predicts that richer media always improve communication outcomes, the Theory of Media Synchronicity suggests that

effectiveness depends on the fit between synchronicity level and communication task. This tension points to important boundary conditions that future empirical research should investigate, particularly in Generation Z markets where expectations for interactivity and relational communication are especially pronounced.

Generation Z and Digital Consumption Behavior

Generation Z exhibits distinctive digital behaviors shaped by lifelong exposure to mobile technologies and social media platforms (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). This cohort demonstrates a strong preference for visual storytelling, interactive content, and peer-oriented communication (Priporas et al., 2017). Compared to previous generations, Generation Z is more likely to engage with content that allows immediate participation and social feedback, reflecting their expectation of continuous connectivity.

Research indicates that Generation Z consumers are skeptical of traditional advertising but respond positively to authentic, interactive, and value-driven brand communication (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Livestreaming aligns with these preferences by enabling spontaneous interaction, transparent product demonstrations, and informal communication styles that reduce psychological distance between brands and consumers (Sun et al., 2019). Importantly, Generation Z's digital behaviors are not monolithic. Sub-segments exist within this cohort based on factors such as platform preference, digital literacy levels, and susceptibility to digital fatigue (Dimock, 2019). Some Generation Z consumers actively seek intensive interactive experiences, while others exhibit avoidance behaviors in response to perceived information overload or forced authenticity in commercial livestreams.

Beyond skepticism toward traditional advertising, Generation Z demonstrates heightened sensitivity to social cues, peer validation, and visible audience reactions in digital environments (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Livestreaming amplifies these dynamics by making participation publicly observable, thereby reinforcing social influence processes and normative behavior (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Psychological drivers such as the Need for Belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) (Przybylski et al., 2013) are particularly prevalent among Generation Z consumers and play an important role in motivating livestream participation. The visible engagement of peers during livestreams creates social pressure to participate, while real-time exclusivity of content triggers FOMO-driven viewing behaviors.

Furthermore, Generation Z possesses a sophisticated capacity for detecting “forced authenticity” in digital environments (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Unlike earlier generations who may accept polished brand narratives, Generation Z consumers scrutinize livestream hosts for signs of scripted behavior, excessive commercialization, or performative spontaneity. This

digital scepticism means that livestream strategies must balance commercial objectives with genuine relational communication to maintain credibility. Consequently, livestream interactions function not only as sources of information but also as social signals that guide trust formation, brand evaluation, and engagement decisions among Generation Z consumers (Sun et al., 2019).

Table 1 Comparison of Generation Z and Millennial Digital Engagement Characteristics

Dimension	Generation Z	Millennials
Media preference	Short-form video, livestreaming, interactive content	Social media posts, blogs, long-form video
Authenticity expectation	High; detects forced authenticity; prefers raw and unscripted	Moderate; accepts curated brand narratives
Interaction style	Real-time, participatory, co-creative	Comment-based, asynchronous feedback
Trust formation	Peer validation, behavioral cues, parasocial bonds	Expert endorsement, brand reputation
Digital fatigue risk	High; selective engagement, platform switching	Moderate; more sustained platform loyalty
Key psychological drivers	FOMO, Need for Belonging, social visibility	Self-expression, community building
Advertising response	Skeptical of traditional ads; values authenticity	Responds to influencer marketing and branded content

Managing Livestream Interactivity

Interactivity is a defining feature of livestreaming and a key determinant of its effectiveness (Liu & Shrum, 2002). Interactivity refers to the extent to which users can influence content and communication processes in real time, shaping both message flow and relational dynamics.

Empirical studies indicate that higher levels of perceived interactivity enhance engagement, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions in online environments (Wu, 2006; Jiang et al., 2010). For Generation Z, interactive elements such as polls, emojis, and gamified features further enhance enjoyment and perceived agency, reinforcing their motivation to participate.

Interactivity should therefore be understood as both a technological affordance and a managerial capability. While digital platforms enable interaction, engagement quality depends



largely on how firms structure participation and respond to audience input (Liu & Shrum, 2002). Timely responsiveness, acknowledgment of viewer contributions, and adaptive content adjustments signal attentiveness and respect, which are particularly important for Generation Z audiences (Wu, 2006). Well-managed interactivity strengthens perceived relational value and helps sustain engagement over time (Jiang et al., 2010).

However, the relationship between interactivity and engagement is not strictly linear. Excessive interactivity may lead to information overload, cognitive fatigue, or a sense of chaos in the livestream environment, particularly when hosts cannot adequately manage large volumes of simultaneous audience input (Cao et al., 2021). This suggests an inverted U-shaped relationship where moderate, well-structured interactivity produces optimal engagement, while unmanaged or excessive interactivity may diminish the quality of the experience. Managers must therefore design interactivity not merely as a volume metric but as a curated communicative process that balances audience participation with content coherence and host responsiveness.

Trust, Authenticity, and Parasocial Interaction: A Relational Mechanism

Trust is central to effective digital communication, particularly in commercial contexts where perceived risk and uncertainty are high (Gefen et al., 2003). Livestreaming fosters trust by reducing information asymmetry and enabling transparent, real-time communication between brands and consumers (Pavlou, 2003). The concept of source credibility further enriches this understanding: trust in livestreaming is not only a function of platform transparency but also depends on the perceived expertise, attractiveness, and trustworthiness of the host (Ohanian, 1990). Source credibility operates as a critical mediator between the platform's interactivity and the brand's perceived trustworthiness, with credible hosts serving as relational bridges that translate interactive affordances into consumer trust.

Parasocial interaction, defined as the illusion of a face-to-face relationship between viewers and media figures, is intensified in livestreaming environments due to repeated exposure and interactive exchanges (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Tukachinsky, 2013). Authentic and responsive hosts can form strong parasocial bonds with viewers, enhancing perceived credibility and persuasive influence (Lou & Kim, 2019). In the context of livestreaming commerce, parasocial interaction represents a particularly powerful mechanism because it combines the relational intimacy of interpersonal communication with the scalability of mass media. Generation Z consumers, who form parasocial bonds rapidly through frequent and emotionally resonant interactions, are especially susceptible to the influence of livestream hosts who demonstrate authenticity and responsiveness.

In livestreaming contexts, trust development is closely linked to perceived authenticity and consistency over time. Real-time visibility increases audience scrutiny, strengthening trust when interactions appear genuine but undermining credibility when behavior seems inconsistent or overly commercialized (Pavlou, 2003; Gefen et al., 2003). These dynamics are particularly salient for Generation Z consumers, who rely heavily on relational and behavioral cues when forming trust judgments and long-term brand relationships (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

Integrating these elements, this article proposes a relational mechanism model in which interactivity serves as the input, source credibility and parasocial interaction function as mediating processes, and consumer trust represents the outcome that enables subsequent engagement. This integrated relational perspective yields several managerial propositions: (P1) Higher host responsiveness increases perceived authenticity and parasocial bond strength; (P2) Source credibility moderates the relationship between interactivity and trust, such that credible hosts amplify the trust-building effects of interactive features; (P3) Excessive commercialization during livestreams weakens parasocial bonds and diminishes trust, particularly among Generation Z audiences who are sensitized to forced authenticity.

Importantly, the dark side of these relational dynamics must also be acknowledged. Strong parasocial bonds can lead to consumer vulnerability, where viewers develop disproportionate loyalty to hosts and make purchase decisions based on relational attachment rather than rational evaluation (Tukachinsky, 2013). This raises ethical concerns regarding the manipulation of parasocial relationships for commercial purposes, particularly when targeting young consumers who may lack fully developed critical evaluation skills.

Strategic, Engagement, and Performance Implications of Livestreaming

Livestreaming reshapes consumer engagement by enabling real-time, participatory communication between brands and audiences. Consistent with consumer engagement theory, livestreaming simultaneously stimulates cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement (Brodie et al., 2011). Cognitively, livestreams provide rich information, immediate clarification, and dynamic demonstrations that reduce uncertainty. Emotionally, live interaction fosters excitement, enjoyment, and a sense of social connection. Behaviorally, livestreaming encourages active participation through commenting, sharing, and purchasing actions (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

For Generation Z consumers, engagement in livestreaming environments is a dynamic and experiential process rather than a static outcome. Engagement emerges through continuous interaction, co-creation, and social visibility, with participation itself representing a form of experiential value. Livestreaming supports a reinforcing engagement cycle in which



interaction strengthens emotional attachment, and emotional attachment motivates further participation (Brodie et al., 2011).

From a performance perspective, livestreaming contributes to increased conversion rates, customer retention, and brand equity by accelerating decision-making and reducing perceived risk through real-time communication (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; Sun et al., 2019). The transparency and immediacy of livestream interactions enhance consumer confidence, positively influencing purchase intention and repeat engagement. However, the relationship between livestreaming engagement and business performance is not direct or guaranteed; rather, it is moderated by several contextual factors. Product type represents a critical moderator: livestreaming may be more effective for experiential and fashion-oriented products where visual demonstration and social validation drive purchase decisions, compared to utilitarian or high-complexity products where detailed specifications and expert evaluation take precedence. Similarly, price sensitivity, market competition, and platform characteristics can attenuate or amplify the engagement-to-performance link.

Livestreaming as Market Intelligence

Beyond short-term performance outcomes, livestreaming should be viewed as a strategic communication capability rather than a temporary promotional tool (Yadav & Pavlou, 2014). Effective livestream strategies require deliberate design of interactive formats, careful selection and training of credible hosts, and integration with broader digital marketing ecosystems. Importantly, livestreaming generates valuable market intelligence by providing immediate, unfiltered insights into consumer reactions, preferences, and pain points. Unlike traditional market research methods that suffer from temporal delays and self-report biases, livestream interactions produce real-time behavioral data including comment sentiment, engagement patterns, and purchase timing. This intelligence supports agile decision-making and iterative product development, enabling firms to respond rapidly to evolving consumer demands in Generation Z markets (Sun et al., 2019).

New Knowledge

Integrating these insights, this article proposes a conceptual framework (Figure 1) in which livestream interactivity enhances social presence and trust through parasocial interaction and source credibility, leading to multidimensional consumer engagement (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral) and improved business performance. Generation Z characteristics amplify these relationships by increasing sensitivity to interactivity, authenticity, and social connection, while contextual moderators such as product type, platform features,

and digital fatigue represent boundary conditions. This integrated perspective highlights livestreaming's strategic value as an engagement-driven digital communication modality.

Table 1 Conceptual Framework: Livestreaming, Consumer Engagement, and Business Performance in Generation Z Markets

Antecedents	Mediating Mechanisms	Psychological Outcomes	Engagement Dimensions	Performance Outcomes
Livestream	Social Presence	Trust	Cognitive	Conversion
Interactivity	Parasocial	Perceived	Engagement	Rates
(Temporal,	Interaction	Authenticity	Emotional	Customer
Social,	Source	Involvement	Engagement	Retention
Functional	Credibility		Behavioral	Brand Equity
Affordances)			Engagement	Market Intelligence

Limitations and Future Research Directions

As a conceptual article, this study does not test hypotheses or present empirical findings. Its contribution lies in theory integration, conceptual development, and the articulation of testable propositions. The absence of empirical validation represents a key limitation that should guide future research priorities.

Future research should empirically examine the proposed relationships using quantitative, experimental, and qualitative methods (Hair et al., 2016). Several specific research directions emerge from this conceptual analysis. First, researchers should test the proposed boundary conditions by examining whether livestreaming effectiveness differs significantly across product categories, such as comparing fast fashion with luxury goods or experiential services with utilitarian products. Second, the emergence of AI-generated avatars and virtual hosts in livestreaming presents an important area for investigation: do AI-driven hosts generate comparable levels of social presence and parasocial interaction as human hosts, and how does Generation Z perceive authenticity in interactions with non-human presenters? Third, cross-cultural studies are essential to determine whether the engagement dynamics identified in this framework hold across different cultural contexts, given that livestreaming commerce practices vary substantially between Asian and Western markets.

Additionally, future research should address the ethical dimensions of livestreaming, particularly regarding Generation Z consumers' privacy and the potential manipulation of parasocial bonds for commercial gain. Longitudinal studies would help determine whether parasocial relationships formed through livestreaming lead to sustainable brand loyalty or



whether they create patterns of dependency and impulsive consumption. Research into the mechanisms underlying digital fatigue in livestreaming contexts would also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of when and why engagement declines despite high interactivity. Finally, the role of algorithmic recommendation systems in shaping livestream exposure and engagement patterns among Generation Z represents an under-explored but increasingly important area of inquiry.

Conclusion

This article positions livestreaming as an emerging and strategically significant digital communication modality with important implications for consumer engagement and business performance. By integrating Media Richness Theory, Social Presence Theory, the Theory of Media Synchronicity, and Consumer Engagement Theory, the article offers a hierarchical theoretical framework that explains how livestreaming's interactive affordances build social presence, foster trust through parasocial interaction and source credibility, and stimulate multidimensional consumer engagement.

The proposed conceptual framework advances beyond existing fragmented approaches by identifying the sequential relationships among these theoretical mechanisms and specifying the moderating conditions under which livestreaming engagement translates into business performance. The article also acknowledges the potential dark side of livestreaming dynamics, including information overload, consumer vulnerability, and ethical concerns surrounding the commercialization of parasocial bonds with young consumers.

For practitioners, the framework underscores that effective livestreaming is not simply a function of technological deployment but requires strategic orchestration of interactivity, deliberate cultivation of host credibility, and sensitivity to the unique psychological and behavioral characteristics of Generation Z consumers. As livestreaming continues to evolve through technological innovations such as AI-driven hosts, augmented reality integration, and algorithmic personalization, its role as a central pillar of digital commerce and consumer engagement strategy will likely intensify. Understanding and managing these dynamics with both strategic ambition and ethical responsibility will be essential for firms seeking to build enduring relationships with the next generation of consumers.

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