Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Financial Technology and Business Analysis
DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2025.BL32287

Research on Gen Z's Reactions to Branding Advertisements on Douyin Through the AIDA Model

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Abstract. This paper investigates the specific persuasion process of short videos to Gen Z consumers, with the framework of the AIDA model stages-- attention, interest, desire, and action. By conducting three focus groups, our research explores how short videos facilitate the four stages of the AIDA model. These findings reveal that while Douyin advertisements successfully capture the attention of the audience, they fail to sustain the interest stage because of the goal-filtering effect of Gen Z, which reduces further cognitive resource allocation once the content becomes irrelevant. The study points out that Douyin advertisements should balance entertainment with information relevance to promote the desire and action stages. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed to pursue social media marketing strategies towards Gen Z consumers. The limitations reveal several weaknesses and future potential research pathways.

Keywords: Gen Z, marketing, Douyin short video, AIDA model, consumer behaviour

1. Introduction

With the development of the digital technology, social media usage has boomed throughout the decade [1]. Notably, great amounts of academic researches have explored the social media impact on consumers' purchases and attitudes towards different brands [2]. Therefore, brands tend to adopt social media advertising as a major channel to reinforce brand recognition. Social media marketing can typically be divided into four stages: attention, interest, desire, and action, according to the AIDA model [3].

In this context, video has become a useful tool for social media advertising, with short-video platforms like Douyin gaining increasing popularity especially in China. Among its users, the young, especially Gen Z, have become an important crowd of users of Douyin. While previous research has already explored the association of social media marketing and Gen Z purchasing behaviour, there is a gap in analyzing how the AIDA model applies to marketing on Douyin, using four stages to illustrate the short video advertisements influence on Gen Z.

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DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2025.BL32287

This paper addresses this research gap by answering the following question: How can short-form video content on Douyin enhance consumer responses throughout the four stages of the AIDA model? Which of the four elements of the AIDA model is emphasized the most in social media short video content, and how do they rank? It is proposed that short-form video has a significant impact on attention, interest, and desire while having almost no effect on the action.

In the following section, we firstly review the relevant literature and then present our hypotheses. This is followed by a detailed description of our methodology and the corresponding findings. Lastly, the paper concludes with a discussion of theoretical and practical implication of these findings for marketing.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social media and short video marketing

The digital era has witnessed the unstoppable rise of social media as a primary means of brand marketing; therefore, it is inevitable to see the blossoming of research on the influence of social media branding on consumer purchasing behavior. Among all social media branding methods, short videos are indispensable due to their impressive user engagement rate. Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, dominating the Chinese market and being filled with all sorts of brand advertising, deserves deeper research. While short videos are gaining more popularity, so are Gen Z, those born with ubiquitous internet access.

Thus, in this paper, how to market to Gen Z is being researched, with a specific tool called the AIDA model, which serves as the foundational framework for understanding the different stages of the Gen Z decision-making process throughout the marketing on Douyin. Although previous studies have explored the correlation between social media and Gen Z consumer behaviour, there is still a conspicuous gap in applying the AIDA model to help differentiate the whole reaction process during marketing.

2.2. AIDA model explanation

In the market, ultimate consumers normally do not switch from disinterested individuals to convinced purchasers in one instantaneous step. Rather, they approach the final purchase through a process which contain a series of steps. The purchase behavior is indeed the last step of those complicated steps [3]. These steps can be explained by a model which is designed to represent the stages through which a salesperson should refer to, but was later adopted as a basic framework to explain how persuasive communication (mainly advertising) worked [4].

The AIDA model consists of four steps:

Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action.

1. Attention: Brands use strategies to draw these advertisement watchers' attention to their products, which is manifested as attracting the attention of the target audience through intentional activities. The process of attracting attention should generate certain sensory stimulations (such as visual, auditory, and olfactory stimuli) for consumers, therefore keeping consumers' minds in an excited state.

2. Interest: When consumers are attracted, how to attract their interest is closely associated with the promotion of these products. For instance, they can place advertisements that match the potential demand of specific groups of people, thereby arousing consumers' interest [5].

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3. Desire: Pu and Zhao point out that if consumers receive marketing promotion, they may develop certain interest, but they may not necessarily have the desire to purchase the product. Because interest is not strong enough for people to put their minds into practice. Desire is only formed when people present obvious behaviour such as searching information about the products.

4. Action: After the desire is generated, people usually take the action to finally purchase the product. This is influenced by a lot of practical factors like discount and limited time.

In summary, AIDA can help marketers draw potential customers' attention to the product, attracting their interest. Then, they can use certain methods to make customer want to keep possession of this product to stimulate desire and ultimately use other conditions such as time and price to make the deal [6].

2.3. Link between short video and the AIDA model

The design of short video platforms naturally accelerates the attention and interest stages of the AIDA model. Due to the extremely limited time of videos on short video platforms, user attention can be effectively captured [7]. Furthermore, due to other mechanisms of short video platforms, such as pushing specific videos to users tailored to their preferences, consumer will be more likely to pay attention to these advertisements. Therefore their interest will be caught instantly even they only spend a few seconds on this short video [8]. Therefore, it will be convenient for brands to build their brand image on Douyin.

However, according to Shen & Wang, the desire and action stages require short-video content to address user needs, which is difficult to achieve because of the length of the video [9]. It has become more challenging because videos contain numerous elements intended to capture user interest, which suggests that designers naturally place greater emphasis on the interest stage rather than the desire stage. Nevertheless, research argues that interaction is regarded critical for the stimulation of consumer desire [10]. Compared to short videos, live streaming exhibits higher level of interaction so that it could be more advantageous in eliciting desire. Therefore, short videos tend to have significant advantages in eliciting attention and desire stages.

2.4. Link between Gen Z and the AIDA model

Gen Z are digital natives who have been influenced by advertisements. Most of them grow up watching television, and since then they have been impressed by these promotions. Later in their lives, they have developed a strong connection with short video, which is the most convenient entertainment for Gen Z. Advertisements on Douyin have prominent features that perfectly reflect several factors in the AIDA model. For example, the opening seconds are a barrier that determines whether viewers progress to later AIDA stages [11]. Prior work shows that Gen Z's attention can be effectively captured and other features such as storytelling facilitate further engagement. It means Gen Z can be guided from the initial Attention Stage to Interest Stage in the first few seconds of short videos [5,6]. Nevertheless, it is still not certain how Gen Z are influenced by short videos in the subsequent stages, Desire and Action. In addition, it remains uncertain which of the four stages has the most impact on short video marketing towards Gen Z.

3. Methodology

To solve the question below, we selected Gen Z participants from various backgrounds such as regions and gender to make the result more representative. Furthermore, participants' average

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2025.BL32287

monthly spending was approximately the same level to make sure purchase ability does not interfere the result. Our data were collected from three focus groups, each have five participants and last for 45 minutes. During each session, three branding videos were played to make the following question about advertisements more likely to associated with reality. The three brands are milk, mobile phone, and automobile. All three videos have subtle differences in styles: both the milk and car advertisements used humor to catch audience's attention, while the iPhone advertisement highlighted functional features. Among two humor-based videos, the car advertisement presented daily conflicts, and the milk advertisement put humor in a fictional scenario.

Besides focus group conduction, we adopted a literature review on this method. The focus group method was utilized because of its effectiveness in revealing psychological and social mechanisms underlying consumer choices as people can express themselves during the interaction and specific contexts [12]. Furthermore, it may produce other research questions, facilitating the potential exploration of future research branches [13]. For example, the comparison of different prices may also influence the effects of advertising. Scholars also note several limitations of this research method, such as its strong susceptibility to users' inaccurate descriptions, high implementation costs to gather enough people, and its insufficient sample size.

Aside from this method itself, our study has several limitations when implementing. First, the focus group participants were from a relatively narrow population, because most of them receive higher education. It means that they are likely to fail to represent all Gen Z. Second, the study put its research focus on Douyin's content that is posted by brands themselves, paying little attention to user and influencer content, which are also important components of short video advertisements. Nevertheless, our research does not take all these contents into the scope of research. Third, the research focuses on immediate reactions to short video advertising rather than long-term impacts on customers. Therefore, we might ignore the features of certain short videos that are intended for long term promotion effects on the customers. Finally, the short videos we use are only from Douyin; that is to say, the research scope is only within Douyin, limiting the theory's explanatory ability of other channels such as TikTok or Instagram.

The definitions of four stages of the AIDA model are adopted during the focus group interview analysis as follows. Within the scope of the initial seconds of the video, if participants overcome the habitual scrolling and choose to continue watching the video even for another seconds, then it is said the video attracted their attention. Interest is defined as higher level of engagement towards the video. In this stage, most audience are willing to spend their time watching nearly the whole advertisement. The desire stage is reached if the audience show a strong intention of acknowledging furthermore information of the products. For example, they would search for functions and similar substitutes about the product usually because they are already considering the consequences of owning the products. The action stage is confirmed when the customers are making very specific preparations such as gathering the fund in order to make the final purchase.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Key findings and discussion

Table 1. Gen Z focus group feedback on Douyin AIDA stages

AIDA Model	Group A Feedback	Group B Feedback	Group C Feedback
Attention	individual needs conflicting design	individual needs celebrity charm	Prominent functions high relevance

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2025.BL32287

Table 1. (continued)

Interest	enjoyable content entertainment	Demand matching emotional resonance	Demand matching brief content
Desire	Practicality cost performance platform discount	demand first cost performance product uniqueness	Brand recognition function recognition Demand matching
Action	budget constraint product comparison	budget constraint impulse purchase	Product differences brand and habit influence

Table 2. Key mechanisms in Gen Z responses to Douyin Ads

Category	Practice Description	Instances in Prior Research	Data Example
Narrative Transportation	content satisfaction	Users are drawn to the entertainment value generated by high-quality advertising content, such as compelling narratives, which reduces their skepticism toward promotional advertisements and allows brand information to be unconsciously absorbed.	Narrative, transportation and advertising [14].
	story engagement	The advertisement successfully introduces a narrative, which stimulates viewers' interest in the story. This demand for narrative engagement objectively prolongs watching time and leaves an impressive trait in people's minds.	Engaging with stories and characters: Learning, persuasion, and transportation into narrative worlds [15].
Perceived Ad Relevance	reality-linked processing	When advertising content is highly aligned with users' ongoing daily activities, it capitalizes on their existing attentional focus and thereby minimizes the negative effects of advertising intrusiveness.	How augmented reality affects advertising effectiveness [16].
	situation-based decision	When advertisements align with users' current life contexts, they are perceived as an extension of daily routine rather than an intrusion, enhancing their capacity to capture attention and stimulate interest.	/
Perceived Ad Intrusiveness	Experience Disruption	where a user's originally coherent and smooth experience is disrupted or interrupted by external factors during the process of using a product platform or service.	Intrusive advertising and its effects [17].
	Operation Aversion	When users watch advertisements, they may experience negative psychological feelings and avoidance tendencies due to the operation design of the advertisements going against usage habits, increasing additional operation costs, or disrupting the smoothness of operation.	Intrusive advertising [18].
Entertainment-Persuasion Trade-off	Attitude Decoupling	The phenomenon where users' attitudes towards advertisements and their attitudes towards the products and brands promoted by the advertisements are different and separate from each other.	Exploring the relationship between advertising attitudes and brand attitudes [19].
	Attention Consumption	When users watch advertisements, the attention resources originally intended for the product are occupied and overly consumed, leading to difficulties in focusing their attention and even affecting the experience of core activities.	The role of attention in advertising effectiveness [20].

The research's objective is to establish how these advertisements capture initial attention and finally make the audience decide to close the deal. Throughout the process, we yielded two critical findings. To begin with, we focused on the factors influencing Gen Z on Douyin. Firstly, we perceived that existing interest and goal-directed processing serve as critical filters. In most circumstances, these filters will lead to attention absence if the advertisement fails to align with users' core value expectations. Secondly, the exception of circumventing this detecting filter requires

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2025.BL32287

elevating video quality. That is to say, if the video contains enough entertaining elements, the advertisement will be regarded rather as an entertainment than simply an advertisement. Therefore, the advertisement might bypass people's filtering mechanism.

In the second finding, we decided to reorder the importance of the four stages in the AIDA model. We identify the importance of attention and interest in Douyin short videos, but find limited evidence concerning the desire and action. Although the stages of attention and interest can be effectively achieved, the transition towards desire and action remains challenging. In our further research, we find out that the main difficulty arises from the inherent intrusiveness of advertisements and the misalignment between entertainment-based value and purchasing intention. Thus we began to question whether the original sequence of the model could explain Gen Z's responses to the short videos on Douyin. Furthermore, we decided to delve into the transition between the Interest stage and Desire stage.

4.2. Further discussion

4.2.1. Attention

As our literature review has revealed, short videos naturally possess the capacity to capture attention. Through diverse mechanisms like visual and music stimulation, short videos tend to achieve their goal, which facilitates the next stage of the AIDA model, interest [7].

4.2.2. Introduction of mechanisms

The filters previously mentioned will lead to interest loss of audience when watching once a short video fails to align with their actual demand. Moreover, the existing brand image strongly influences the willingness to continue. Under this circumstance, even if the brand later delivers content that is consistent with users' expectations, the audience will recall similar brands that they are most familiar with.

However, the advanced algorithm of Douyin can leverage both mechanisms. By identifying users' daily habits and history preferences, Douyin pushes corresponding content to amplify Perceived Relevance [16]. This breakthrough is mainly achieved by high Perceived Content Quality [14]and Story Engagement [15].

4.2.3. The barrier of interest

This research reveals that the Interest stage of the AIDA model is impacted by three major factors: cost performance, brand impressions, and algorithm reinforcement.

Cost Performance

Interest is only activated when the values expressed in the content matches the audience's inherent expectation. Conversely, a lack of such consistency triggers the Goal-Directed Filtering Effect, leading to immediate insufficiency of interest. For instance, the case analysis of Yili Milk demonstrated that participants immediately lost their interest when the advertised content did not match their prior expectations concerning health and nutrition. The Interviewee from focus group C further illuminates the cognitive resources restraint of this filtering mechanism: "For daily goods like milk, you purchase a carton, consume it, and may forget its taste the very next day... Milk is merely consumables—I discard the packaging upon consumption; it lacks profound or personal importance for me".

Brand Impression

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Furthermore, the user's existing brand image significantly influences subsequent willingness to watch. This evidence underscores that cognitive resources are finite; once these resources are occupied by a negative association or other brands, even high quality content will be less likely to break the established cognitive barrier. Focus group: "For daily goods like milk, you purchase a carton, consume it, and may forget its taste the very next day... Milk is merely consumables—I discard the packaging upon consumption; it lacks profound or personal importance for me."

Algorithm Reinforcement

With this filtering challenge, Douyin's sophisticated algorithm is adept at counteracting the Goal-Directed Filtering Mechanism. The algorithm has the ability to detect users' core expectations and inherent values. Consequently it posts content to the users according to their preferences, thereby amplifying Perceived Relevance [16]. This mechanism successfully bypasses the cognitive barrier by directly targeting exact desires of audience. Interviewee from focus group B presents empirical evidence for the precedence of Desire over Interest: "I am currently considering purchasing a bag; therefore, when I see bag-related videos, I will pause and view, otherwise I might not watch the advertisement at all," and "For example, when I recently had a purchase intent, I frequently browse products related to fitness".

Moreover, high-quality content and Story Engagement [15] provide an effective means of bypassing previous negative brand associations. When a video is perceived with good quality content [14], user attention tends to be shifted from the purchase intent to the narrative itself, substantially reducing consumer resistance towards advertisement.

4.2.4. Challenges for the desire and action stage

Even if advertisements manage to grab users' attention, two major challenges still need addressing: ad intrusiveness and conversion efficiency. This issue grows more specific when we analyze it against Generation Z's (Gen Z) unique psychological traits.

Perceived Advertisement Intrusiveness

Intrusiveness is a core factor driving users to avoid ads, and how intrusive users find an ad is closely linked to the ad's frequency and duration [18]. For Gen Z, their typical fragmented attention makes it hard to stay focused at a high level for long stretches—this makes their reactions to intrusive ads stronger. When ads are too frequent, overly long, or low in quality, they break the coherent, seamless experience Gen Z expects when using a product platform or service. We call this phenomenon "experience disruption". As interviewees pointed out, long ad durations or too many ads trigger annoyance because of this disruption; in turn, this annoyance makes users avoid ads more and deepens their dislike for the product being promoted. The key harm of ad intrusiveness is that it weakens users' sense of autonomy [17]—and autonomy is a critical psychological need for Gen Z. As "digital natives," they have high demands for smooth digital experiences and control over their own information flows. What's more, if an ad's design adds unnecessary operational burdens on Gen Z consumers or disrupts their daily activities, users may develop negative psychological responses and a tendency to avoid the ad. For example, an Interviewee from focus group B explained: "Sometimes I know the advertiser gets a commission if I click the link. So, I choose not to buy through it". This kind of "resource plunder" directly clashes with Gen Z's pursuit of individualized cognition. To Gen Z, these mandatory interaction mechanisms and experience disruptions are clear violations of their digital autonomy [17]—this not only sparks negative emotions but also sets off avoidance behaviors in a systematic way. Over time, this erodes their interest in the ad and seriously damages both their user experience and satisfaction with the

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2025.BL32287

platform. In other words, from the perspective of attention resource allocation, ads that take up too much of users' attention are essentially a form of "resource plunder" [20].

Entertainment Persuasion Trade-off

Entertainment-Persuasion Trade-off refers to the disconnect between advertising attitude and brand attitude—this is no accidental phenomenon [19]. This disconnect becomes even more obvious when Gen Z embraces a value-influenced consumption logic. A highly entertaining ad doesn't guarantee stronger brand persuasiveness [21]; for Gen Z consumers, while ads with rich content can catch their attention and spark curiosity about the product, they don't stop at just being entertained. Instead, they check whether the ad lines up with their personal values in the current era. In such cases, "attitude decoupling" usually happens—meaning there's a gap between how they perceive the ad and how they perceive the brand. Eventually, this leads to low purchase rates. This attitude decoupling also comes from Gen Z's sensitivity to brand authenticity: when ads rely too much on entertainment while downplaying product value, Gen Z sees this as "inauthentic pandering"—a view that conflicts with their value-driven consumption habits. As one interviewee said: "Like you mentioned, old ads—take 8848 mobile phones, for example—were really memorable, but that's all. Newer advertisements make me pay more attention, but whether I decide to buy the product is a different story". Further interview findings reveal two common scenarios among users who watch ads: either they have intentions to buy the product, or they're simply attracted to the advertisement content with no desire to make a purchase. This confirms that high entertainment characteristics do not ensure high persuasiveness. In addition, when entertainment overshadows product information, it weakens the advertisement's effectiveness [22]. Gen Z tend to focus on the advertisement's entertaining factors, rather than the product's practical use. This may give rise to certain phenomenon where audience might like the advertisements but do not feel like purchasing the product. This is due to that the advertisement becomes so entertaining that it lost its original function of promotion. The gap is especially apparent among Gen Z, as they often prefer advertisements that lack promotional effect but are rich in entertainment elements.

5. Implication

5.1. Theoretical implications

The AIDA model provides a basic framework for explaining the essential stages through which advertising influences consumer behavior. Traditionally, the model suggests that the transition from attention to interest is natural and fluid, as these two stages are closely connected. However, we contend that the emergence of desire may precede the stages of interest, where progression towards interest is regarded dependent on subsequent cognition developments. Because of the goal directed behaviour of Gen Z consumers, they tend to discriminate whether the content of the advertisement is relevant to their current demand before they continue watching.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory, which emphasizes that consumer choice is strongly linked with their demands, helps clarify goal directed processing as a filtering mechanism [23,24]. Unlike the traditional model, our assumption explains the transition from attention to interest to be a discontinuous process. Instead of the response of the interest stage, the desire stage emerges immediately after the attention stage, acting as rational evaluation and filtering mechanism. If the content contradicts with customers' demand, then they lose interest even if the video is entertaining enough. Then it reappears before the action stage which is just an unconscious response before taking action.

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2025.BL32287

In conclusion, our ranking emphasizes the priority of desire over interest, which contradicts with the traditional AIDA model So the order would be more accurate in the context of Douyin short videos, which is attention-desire(rational thinking)-interest-desire (unconscious)-action.

5.2. Practical implications

5.2.1. Story engagement

Gen Z usually show a greater interest in storytelling according to our analysis. Therefore, they are more likely to spend their time on the content with story elements. Brands should shift their attention from intentions of promotions to reduce consumers' skepticism. For example, brands ought to abandon the traditional advertising approach, such as listing product features which are regarded boring by Gen Z consumers. Instead, they should use strategies like putting product promotion into everyday scenarios or adopting emotional content to attract customers. This connection might then stimulate users' purchase intentions.

5.2.2. Balance of entertainment and promotion

The focus group shows that excessively entertaining advertising content may distract users' attention and even damage their understanding of the product. Therefore, brands should try to balance entertainment and promotion in their video. For example, using daily life scenarios in the advertisement allows the content to remain engaging and clarify the functions at the same time. In this way, entertainment does not entirely conceal the product information.

6. Limitations

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the focus group participants share quite a few characteristics, because most of them receive higher education. It means that the opinions above might fail to represent all Gen Z. Secondly, the research focuses on Douyin's advertisements, excluding other contents such as influencer videos. Thirdly, the research primarily studied immediate reactions to short video advertising, we only studied the instant effects of these advertisement. It did not capture how these advertisements' long-term impact on Gen Z through mechanisms like repeated exposures or interactions with brands. Finally, as the research is launched only on Douyin, the scope is quite limited, undermining its generality to other social platforms such as TikTok or Instagram.

7. Future research

In response, future research can address these limitations by improving following areas. To begin with, larger focus groups are more likely to identify the new factors such as education and financial status. Although Douyin is a representative of social media apps, the brands on Douyin are limited and most of them are Chinese brands. So studies across different platforms may be beneficial to finding out whether the observed framework have the potential for broader application. Additionally, incorporating other contents like influencer videos into the analysis would provide a more convincing perspective of how Gen Z respond to short video commercials. Finally, comparisons between Gen Z from different regions could verify how cultural norms influence the four stages of the AIDA model.

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2025.BL32287

8. Conclusion

This paper studies the application of the AIDA Model on Gen Z consumers' responses to brand advertisements on Douyin. The primary finding indicates that the four stages in the AIDA model are different from the traditional order. It will be more appropriate if Desire is before Interest as the reason following.

The research also explains our hypothesis that short video content enhances consumer attention and interest compared to traditional advertisements. However, due to the Goal-Directed Filtering and the negative impact of Advertisement Intrusiveness, the transition from Interest to the subsequent Desire and Action stages becomes more challenging, making the model more difficult to explain.

Theoretically, this study refines the AIDA Model by proposing a variant that is more suitable for Gen Z's response to the short video marketing on Douyin. Consequently, we recommend that marketers should emphasize both entertaining elements and relevance to user demand. By leveraging algorithm advantage and advanced advertisement design, brands can be more likely to achieve higher efficiency in brand promotion and higher purchase rate.

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