

Targeting Gen Z Using Instagram and TikTok Marketing

by
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Abstract

Gen Z, people ages 10-25 in 2022, is a generation of many unique differences shaped by the events they have grown up with. This generation appreciates authenticity and a digital shopping experience from brands, and they often find new brands using Instagram and TikTok either from the brand directly or from an influencer promoting the brand. After 7 months of using Instagram and TikTok to grow a brand targeted to Gen Z, I found that authenticity leads to a loyal customer group, high audience reach does not always equal proportionally high sales, social media marketing and content creation takes hours of work per day, and it takes time to grow a brand and relationships through social media.

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Introduction

Generation Z, the next largest generation of buyers with “\$360 billion in disposable income” (Pollard, 2021), is a generation that values authenticity and sharing personal relationships on Instagram and TikTok with peers and brands. They also value the ease and enjoyment of online shopping, and COVID-19 only increased their use of digital shopping, often starting on social media. These platforms pose great opportunities for brands of small and large size to meet Gen Z where they are and reach their ideal audiences effectively. This thesis explores the literature regarding Gen Z’s use of Instagram and TikTok for purchasing and personal relationships. The research is then applied in the creation of a brand called SentibyAbi to provide an example of using Instagram and TikTok to build a brand marketed toward Gen Z.

Literature Review

Who is Generation Z?

The terms “Millennial” and “Gen Z” are ubiquitous terms among people today, and each generational cohort has been separated to develop targeted research studies for marketing purposes, behavioral analysis, purchasing behaviors, and more. There is some discrepancy on the exact dates of separation for each, but for this study Millennials were born between 1981 to 1996 and those in Gen Z were born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019). In 2017, researchers predicted that Gen Z would include more than sixty-five million people in the U.S. alone by 2020, which reveals over 40% of the entire

consuming population in the U.S. (Priporas et al., 2017). Each generational cohort is defined based on the lived experiences each had growing up and the different attitudes and behaviors each cohort's members developed because of those experiences. Due to the generational differences, it is much more effective for marketers to view people in groups of generational cohorts rather than simply by age alone (Chane et al., 2017). For marketing to be effective, it is especially important to understand the target audience, based on its likes, beliefs, and motivations.

Gen Z specifically has been shaped by technology. Its members grew up in an age with consistent access to the internet, and most of them were between the ages of 0-11 when the first iPhone was released in 2007 (Goldring & Azab, 2020). They also lived through the 2008 recession, encouraging value-conscious buying habits and thrifting among the generation (Goldring & Azab, 2020). Williams and Page (2011) suggest Gen Zers value authenticity, security, instant gratification, imagination, and peer acceptance with creativity. All these specific values of this generation can and should be utilized in the development of marketing campaigns and strategies. Additionally, a different study found that the attention span of Gen Z has decreased from 12 seconds for Millennials to a total of 8 seconds (Shatto Gen Z (Shatto & Erwin, 2016). The decline indicates that marketing tools need to be more engaging than ever before, especially in the first 8 seconds of contact. It is important for businesses to understand these characteristics of Gen Zers: their values, beliefs, and what will be most engaging for this generation to survive in the competitive Gen Z consumer market.

COVID-19's Impact on Online Shopping and Social Media Use

Gen Z has grown up in the era of increased online shopping, which makes it critical to develop a seamless integrated marketing and online shopping experience, including social media. According to Pollard, Generation Z has “\$360 billion in disposable income” (2021). Considering that this group’s buyers are between 10 to 25 years old as of 2022, one can assume their purchasing power will continue to increase as they develop and mature. Business owners who want to target this upcoming generation of buyers must adapt to Gen Zers’ purchasing behavior to build brand loyalty now and capitalize on their purchasing power in the future.

To begin to understand how to adapt to this generation, it is important to understand the impact COVID-19 has had on consumers’ online shopping needs. The use of social media and large online shopping platforms such as Amazon were already causing a rise in online shopping among Millennials and Gen Z, and after the pandemic, social media use for shopping significantly increased (Mason et al., 2021). One study found that social media marketing campaigns had a direct impact on increased website traffic (Dolega et al., 2021). When the economies of every nation in the world shut down due to stay-at-home orders because of the COVID-19 outbreak in March of 2020, many consumers who preferred in-store shopping were now much more inclined to using online shopping. The pandemic led to an increased use of all online activities, including telehealth, work from home, online shopping, social media, and other online activities, revealing an overall increase in every area of phone and internet use (Mouratidis &

Papagiannakis, 2021). With many more people now shopping online, customer's needs forced businesses to quickly adapt.

Interestingly, online shopping was not limited to necessities; according to a study by Koch et al. (2020), many Gen Y (Millennials) and Gen Z online shoppers were motivated by hedonic pursuits rather than utilitarian. The researchers conclude that this shift in shopping from necessities to wants was because of increased free time during the lockdown and less availability of other activities (Koch et al., 2020). This study may suggest that even after the pandemic, Gen Y (Millennials) and Z will have an increased motivation to shop online because of the positive feeling and enjoyment associated with the activity.

How Gen Z Uses Social Media and How Businesses Can Utilize the Platforms

Social media apps have also proven to be addictive (Brailovskaia & Teichert, 2020) and are intentionally created to keep people on each app for as long as possible (Montag et al., 2019). Today, businesses can create social media accounts and ads that move people from social media to their websites and take advantage of these addictive and enjoyable activities Gen Zers are already performing. Additionally, many Gen Zers are on social media often because it has been proven that it is used as a tool to cope with feelings of anxiety and loneliness, especially during COVID-19 (Cauberghe et al., 2021). Online shopping was already increasing before the pandemic and has only continued to increase since the lockdown in 2020.

Social media is a constantly changing environment, and Gen Z has become accustomed to experiencing change and quickly adapting. People of Gen Z have grown

up in an age of technology that is constantly evolving, so they have been shaped into people who desire to know their place and identity in the mix of technology, including on social media. A book titled *Gen Z Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age* describes Gen Z as those who believe in the power of their voice and their generation, which TikTok and other social media platforms made obvious because of how one video could reach millions of people overnight.

In the process of Gen Z expressing their identity through social media, they also find others doing the same. Social media is used by Gen Z to express who they are and find digital groups of people with similar likes and hobbies (Katz et al., 2021). This use of social media to find people with similar likes and purchasing behavior is one reason social media can be so beneficial for marketers. If marketers can find the market mavens, or groups of people who have a level of expertise in certain markets of products (Conick, 2019), they can find their ideal target audience much more quickly and efficiently. For example, businesses have found that influencer marketing and user-generated content have provided high return on investment, because they are able to target the specific groups of people who would purchase the products and services businesses are selling (Wertz, 2020). Influencer marketing is valuable for businesses because it is an efficient way to target their ideal customer.

Influencer marketing and user-generated content are both forms of ways regular people post about the products they already use and like, however certain incentives, such as large compensation for promotions, has led to controversy about whether the larger influencers are being authentic in the products they promote (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Due to this questioning of larger influencers' incentives, user-generated content from

those with a smaller following and with values clearly aligned with the business has become more authentic and valued among Gen Z (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Research has specifically revealed that "ads based on user-generated content receive four times higher click-through rates and a 50% drop in cost-per-click compared to average ads" (Wertz, 2020). For Gen Z, this user-generated content is mostly found on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok where they are spending most of their social media time (Afprelaxnews, 2021).

Another way businesses can utilize social media to find their ideal audience is by using the extremely powerful algorithms TikTok and Instagram are utilizing to keep people on their platforms. Dennis Yu (2021), a creator of Facebook and TikTok advertising educational programs, describes how extremely accurate and intensive the TikTok algorithm is. He discusses how TikTok reads not only what creators say but what is physically in the videos creators post. TikTok then uses that information to determine where consumers are and what their interests are. This information is then used to target the watchers based on their watch time of each video to match interests and locations (Yu, 2021). According to Meta (2019), 87% of people said they either followed a brand, visited a website, or made a purchase online after finding a brand on Instagram. The algorithm has developed into a powerful tool for businesses to easily target and reach their ideal customers with ads or organic posts to drive more sales from social media.

Facebook, now called Meta, also includes Instagram after an acquisition in 2012. Instagram is used by Gen Z for posting aesthetic photos, photos with friends, and now reels, which is the Instagram version of TikTok short-form videos. One of the most important aspects of social media, especially Instagram, is the social aspect, and this is

equally as important for brands. Because Gen Z is an inclusive and authenticity-driven generation, brands must learn how to adapt from the one-way street of sales focus alone to a conversation with customers that leads to brand loyalty. Authenticity is especially important to Gen Z in business and their ads because Gen Z has grown up being bombarded by advertising. Therefore, as a business develops its Instagram marketing, it is important to be honest and to stay away from overly product-focused content.

Brands can specifically utilize features on Instagram such as stories, reels, in-feed image posts, shops, direct messaging, and live sessions. Forbes published a list of ten tips for using Instagram to market to Gen Z, and some of its tips include: “Use Instagram stories, experiment with Instagram video, educate Gen Z followers, and mine Gen Z favorite brands for inspiration” (Patel, 2017). Meta also published a list of tips that can be used by businesses in 2022 to grow on Instagram, which include: Use ads to reach new audiences, build a relationship with customers, give your (Instagram) shop an upgrade, and build excitement with a product launch (Instagram Business Team, 2021a). There are thousands of specific tips that can be used by businesses, especially as Instagram continues to update, so it is important to read these update reports from Instagram’s business team website.

Instagram published the success story of Dowel Jones, to paint a picture of what this shift in relational-focused marketing can do. Dowel Jones is a furniture company that used Instagram to gain 56.4 thousand followers by switching from product-based content alone to posting more about the two owners and their story. With this strategy, the owners believe they were able to create a community of people on Instagram who engaged with and felt connected to the owners. The business owners also used Instagram

stories to ask the followers' opinions in developing new products, which led to followers feeling a sense of attachment and investment in the brand (Instagram Business Team, 2021b). When people feel that they have a part to play in the development of a business and can follow along with the business's journey, there is a sense of relationship that often leads to customers feeling loyal to purchase from and share that brand.

To begin to create content for Instagram, a business must know its goals and audience, to curate content that is in line with the brand while matching the target audience's desires. A Buffer Marketing Library article suggests that brands decide on the type of content, or niched content, they will create so that when customers discover the brand, they know what to expect and why they followed the brand to begin with. Examples of types of niches popular on Instagram include fashion, food, productivity, travel, and much more specific niches as well (Griffis, 2021). After the niche has been chosen, it is time to decide how to compile the value the brand can provide, in graphics, videos, and photos.

Another way to make your brand's Instagram page clearly defined is to create a specific bio that describes what you do and who you are as a brand because this is the first or second thing users will see. Other practical tips that should be used on Instagram include using clear images for photo and video, trying more vertical content that takes up more space, using trending sounds and music for reels, and playing around with every new feature Instagram releases (Instagram Business Team, 2021c). Instagram's creation of Instagram reels to mimic TikTok is one of the best ways to get discovered by new people because the way it is set up allows for people to scroll through reels from people they do not already follow. These reels should be creative, fun, entertaining, inspiring,

and sometimes educational as well (@Creators, 2021). There are dozens of specific tips and creative tools to use on Instagram, but the most important thing as a brand is to show up consistently, be authentic, and create a community.

Instagram is a well-established platform in the social media space; however, Gen Z quickly became obsessed and impacted by TikTok's influence on their preferences and attention span. TikTok usage by Gen Z skyrocketed from 19.8 million user in 2019 to 37.3 million as of November 2021 and is predicted by Statista to reach 48.8 million Gen Z users alone in 2025 (Statistica, 2021). If a business is interested in reaching Gen Z, one of the quickest and most profitable ways to do that right now is through TikTok. Compared to previous social media sites, TikTok's set-up differs by emphasizing a feed called the "For You Page," full of creators the user does not already follow, rather than a feed with only the content from their followers. With this "For You Page," there is more opportunity for any brand or creator to be seen by the people the TikTok algorithm believes would be interested in the brand's content. The algorithm is designed by engineers to keep users entertained and on the app as long as possible, and most users would agree that TikTok accomplishes this objective extremely well. As users are on the app consuming, they are also highly influenced by product recommendations from creators. They are also influenced by the emotions and informational value an advertisement creates for them. According to one study, both positive and negative emotions evoked from TikTok advertisements had a positive effect on purchase intention (Araujo et al., 2022). Other factors that led to high purchase intention include user engagement with the advertisements and the level of informational value that a brand provides. Adweek research finds that "nearly half of TikTokers make purchases from

brands they see in the app,” and “TikTok made me buy it” is a commonly known phrase among users (Chauhan, 2022). The power of TikTok for marketing is exciting for brands to utilize by creating their own content on a TikTok business page and discovering creators to also promote their brand.

To begin practically creating content on TikTok, a business must first develop a list of the top characteristics and likes of its target audience. Another question to ask is, how can the brand authentically stand out from competitors with videos and creativity? There are various questions to ask when creating ideal customers, such as what are their interests, what may discourage them from buying, what would encourage them to buy, what is their gender and age, and what stage of life are they in (Chauhan, 2022)? After the ideal customer has been identified, the business can research what other competing businesses are doing and what is working for them. This information is used to brainstorm how to creatively use trending sounds, hashtags, and specific types of content that would work for that brand’s niche.

On TikTok, brands can create a business account where they are able to see analytics and create ads using the TikTok algorithm or custom audiences. Like Instagram, there should be authenticity in the content created with real people shown often, but according to a case study of 300 brands on TikTok, product videos can perform just as well as other content (Abhilash, 2022). TikTok also has a live feature that can be used for questions-and-answers or product launches that make the brand feel more personal and real to viewers. Another way to increase engagement is by replying to comments on the brand’s videos and even on other creators’ videos. Not only does commenting create a sense of relationship with the commentors, but the TikTok algorithm will promote

brands' accounts with which those users like to engage in the comments (Chauhan, 2022). Other tips for TikTok creation include using new features TikTok develops, posting consistently and at peak times, optimizing the brand's bio with links to other socials and websites, using text on the screen, and finding trends that can be used by the brand (Chauhan, 2022). The case study mentioned above also discovered that videos with on-screen text with trending up-beat sounds performed the best overall, so this tip is important to remember when creating brand content (Abhilash, 2022). There is a huge opportunity to increase awareness on TikTok for any size business right now, and with almost 50% of the largest brands still not on TikTok in 2022, now is the time to make the most of the potential (Aditi, 2022). If initially, a brand's TikTok exposure does not feel perfect, at least the brand is showing up on social media, and Gen Z will recognize this.

Gen Z is a generation that values authenticity and enjoys being entertained while also making an impact on the social media platforms they utilize. For brands to reach this generation of buyers, it is imperative to understand how to evoke emotion and a sense of community through Instagram and TikTok. An article in Forbes reports that "97% of Gen Z consumers say they now use social media as their top source of shopping inspiration" (Kastenholz, 2021). Brands that utilize the opportunity to share their story, promote their products and services, and reach Gen Z through TikTok and Instagram will find success in the post COVID-19, online shopping dominated economy.

Thesis Statement

Based on previous research, businesses must implement social media marketing strategies targeted toward Generation Z to reach the next largest generation of buyers and succeed in the current online shopping world. Brands can utilize social media marketing on Instagram and TikTok to develop a sense of brand loyalty among consumers, display products and services, and educate consumers about how brands' specific products and services can solve consumer problems.

The goal of this thesis research and project was to implement the social media marketing strategy research for Generation Z to develop a well-marketed and successful clothing brand. There are various social media platforms that Generation Z uses, but for my project, I focused on TikTok and Instagram because these are among the top five platforms used by Gen Z (Afprelaxnews, 2021). To reach the goals of this project, I first created a brand that I believed would relate to Gen Z. I then manufactured sweatshirts with my designs that are similar to popular designs in the market. Next, I created a plan for what to post on TikTok and Instagram that best targeted my intended Gen Z audience. The marketing goal was to develop a sense of brand loyalty with my target audience through authenticity and engagement using social media. I measured the success of this goal by number of followers, the level of engagement of the followers, and ultimately, the number of sales and the profit the business created.

The results from this project can be useful for business owners hoping to capitalize on Gen Z using social media, specifically TikTok and Instagram. As mentioned above, it is critical for businesses to learn how to target the next largest generation of

buyers, so the results from this project will be useful for businesses as well as for social media managers working on behalf of businesses.

Methods

The first step of this project will be to review the literature regarding marketing to Gen Z using TikTok and Instagram. I will use the research and my two years of experience as a social media manager for a local aesthetics office to create a plan as to how I will market a clothing brand on Instagram and TikTok. Types of information that I must evaluate include how to create the most viral content for social media, how to connect that content with the desires of Gen Z that lead to actual purchases, and how to grow long-term TikTok and Instagram accounts for a brand. The specific details on how to use Instagram and TikTok most effectively, based on what has worked for others, will be implemented in my project. Details, such as photo quality, video length, video orientation, trending sounds, and what is most engaging and liked on each platform, can help me develop a more specific and researched strategy for comparison of results.

As time goes on with social media, trends are constantly changing, and part of the plan for this project will be to stay up to date on trends and utilize them in effective ways that reach new customers. Due to the reality that TikTok is constantly changing, I will be required to watch TikTok weekly to know what sounds and content types are trending. Instagram also changes, although less frequently, so I will need to research what hashtags and strategies are best applied on Instagram for small clothing-business owners.

Throughout the process, I plan to document and save analytics on the posts for each account to ascertain which content is performing the best and adapt to what works.

The other important part of this project will be to develop the branding, order, and heat-press the products, take photos and videos in the clothing, and create a website for purchases. As orders begin to come in, I will have to set aside time to heat-press the designs on the sweatshirts and keep up with documenting the process for the social accounts.

At the completion of the project, I will compile the analytics from the Instagram and TikTok accounts to see how they grew over time. I will organize the posts I make on each account by type and by how well my followers engaged with the posts. With the analytics, I can create a list of what worked and what did not, to share with business owners what types of content can increase engagement and sales among Gen Z users. I will also keep track of inventory and sales to decide if the business was profitable and by how much. Another important evaluation technique includes reading my brand reviews and hearing word-of-mouth among friends and locals. If people are excited to post their images with my products, I will know what products were most favored and have a better understanding of which designs I should continue to create. If customers feel connected to the brand to the extent that they want to share it with their followers, this is one of the best ways to create community and loyalty using social media.

Certain requirements for this project include cost analysis of the best quality and price of heat-press vinyl and sweatshirts. I will also need to learn how to use Adobe Illustrator to create the designs and a website builder to create the website. Cost estimate for the initial order of sweatshirts is around \$185 and the heat transfer vinyl is \$40 for

four colored rolls. For web design, most website builders include a free domain name and cost around \$13 to \$22 per month. I have a camera, as well as my phone and editing software, already available for content creation. For manufacturing the product, I will purchase a \$150 Cricut vinyl cutting machine and 3 Cricut mats of about \$20 each. The heat-press could typically cost from \$85 to \$2,000, but I already have one available to borrow. I will charge \$35 to \$40 per sweatshirt because I want to keep the cost priced for college-age and Gen Z budgets.

Work Plan

The target audience for my brand is the women of Gen Z who enjoy activewear/loungewear and current fashion trends. The brand name is “SentibyAbi,” with a goal to design clothing that brings back sentimental feelings, joy, and remembering what is most important in life. I created the branding details such as colors, logo, fonts, sweatshirt designs, and mission statement by March 5, 2022. I created my designs using Adobe Illustrator, and I had two designs by April 19, 2022. I began by creating a Pinterest board with ideas for my designs, and I started brainstorming in November of 2021. I placed my first order for sweatshirts from JiffyShirts.com around February 2022. After I had my first design, I cut the vinyl design with a Cricut and finished it with my heat press before March 5th. To fund the order for sweatshirts and prints, I used personal savings.

For the next portion of the project, I created Tik Tok and Instagram accounts for the business, which I completed by March 10th. It is important for my project to plan

content ahead of time to post and engage on each account daily. I used a Canon G7X Mark ii camera and my iPhone for photography and videography to create the content for each account. The first photoshoot with my hoodies was at the beach from March 5-9, 2022, on MTSU (Middle Tennessee State University) fall break. I used these photos and videos for posting my first Instagram content and adding photos to the website. I began by implementing current, trending Instagram reel audios because of how effective this technique is in reaching new audiences.

I created a website by March 10th to begin taking orders more officially. I included a page about me and the brand to allow for authenticity and relationship-building with customers. I used Shopify for my website builder. After I created my website, I was able to create an Instagram storefront directly on the Instagram shopping page that created easier shopping for Instagram users. As far as technical details are concerned, I found packaging on Amazon for around \$12, and labels were either printed on regular paper or label stickers I already had available.

During the duration of this project, I recorded and documented the processes of developing the branding, the designs, the website, the social media, the research, the packing and shipping, and many other required processes to run the business. Gen Z values authenticity, so I wanted to take the opportunity to share as many behind the scenes videos and photos as possible. I also shared many times who I was as the brand owner, what I was working on, and often asked for my followers' opinions about designs. Additionally, I met with my thesis advisor and second reader for content ideas, help and brainstorming, and various questions on how to improve the brand's social media.

On October 11th, I began to gather all the social media and website analytics and organize them into what content worked best, what did not work, how certain posts and actions led to purchases, and if the business was profitable overall. Through the process, if I had a significant thought or question, I wrote it down in a notes document on my phone to hopefully use for content to help others build their own brand in the future. I wrote down the questions I asked to develop the brand name and brand content pillars, the target audience, the details of engagement, and what I noticed worked best.

Analysis

After about seven months of starting a t-shirt and hoodie brand from scratch, I have learned many lessons. The most important lessons I learned were that each form of content on Instagram performs differently for different purposes, starting a business takes copious amounts of time and research, there is more to social media marketing than posting aesthetic content, and it takes time to build a brand on social media. A social media marketing strategy must be mixed with other forms of advertising and marketing as well as quality products, services, and branding to grow a business. From my experience with SentibyAbi, I found that the customers I have are very loyal, as predicted, and most came from Instagram. Not surprisingly, each form of post on Instagram and TikTok performs very differently and there are many factors that are involved such as time of posting. Business owners need to be aware that social media content creation takes more time than expected. However, I plan to continue using what I

learned from this project in digital marketing to improve upon what I have started so that I can grow the business further.

Instagram Analysis

The first chart shows the Instagram reach from March 2022 through October 2022 (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Instagram reach from March to October 2022

As shown in figure 1, the Instagram reach remained consistently under 20,000 from March to July as I was posting stories almost every day, around 3 to 4 photos a week, and 1 reel a week or less. The amount I posted varied depending on how busy my work and school load was for that week, as well as if I had time to create any new content the weekend before. During this time, I was working 15 hours a week as a tax intern, completing 15 credit hours of school, and working as a freelance social media manager for about 5 to 10 additional hours a week, so it was often difficult for me to invest the time originally planned. In hindsight, I also realize I often avoided posting because I was too worried about making everything perfect before I could post a reel or photo. A large

part of social media that Gen Z appreciates is authenticity, so I had to become more comfortable with less perfection in posting.

The large spike in reach, in figure 1, to 73,763 was from a reel that performed well for, I predict, a few varied reasons. The analytics of this reel are shown in figure 2 below.

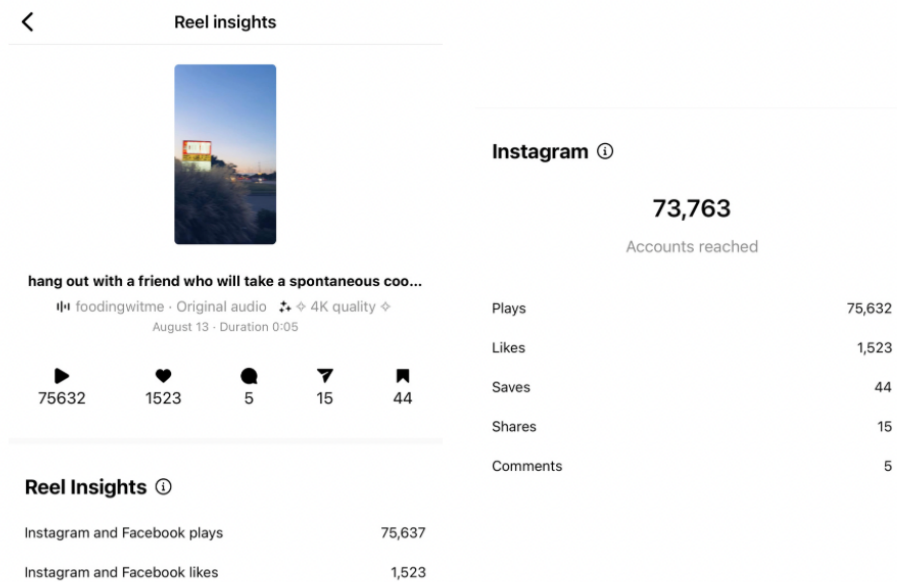


Figure 2: Analytics for Top Performing Instagram Reel

For this reel, I used trending audio, I posted it close to midnight, it was only 5 seconds long, and it was a fun series of fast-paced clips of my friends and I going to Cookout before a party. I remember thinking I should post something about Cookout because it is a restaurant Gen Z bonds over as a late-night college meal location. There are multiple factors that go into creating viral reels as predicted in the research like the audio used, the time posted, the hook used, the length of the video, and the purpose of the

reel in combination with all these factors. The reach moved back down to under 20,000 because the high performing reel did not convert to 80,000 new followers.

The second chart shows the increase in followers during the same period (Figure 3).

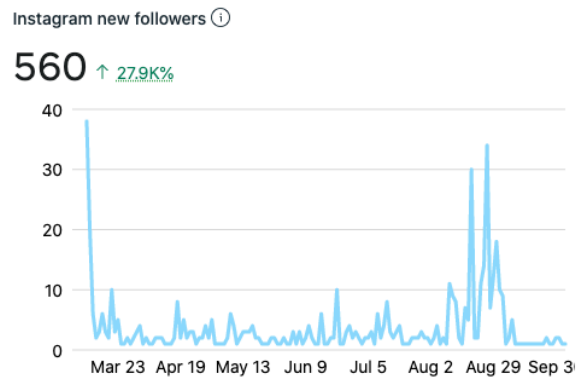


Figure 3: Increase in Instagram Followers from March to October 2022

This chart is useful for analyzing how the reach performance of content converted to new followers when compared the figure 1. The initial spike in followers was from the first post created as I shared it on my personal Instagram page and many of my friends shared it on theirs as well. The followers increased slowly with some weeks performing better than others due to the amount of and type of content posted. For example, reels consistently reached more users than photo and story posts which led to more new followers in comparison.

The viral reel, with analytics in figure 2, resulted in 20 new followers between August 13th and August 14th; however, viral reels, as you can see from figure 3, often convert new followers for about a week after the post date. For the period between August 13th to August 20th, I saw an overall increase of 43 new followers. On August

21st, a new product reel had a reach of 15,821 on Instagram which resulted in 100 new followers during the following week. Through creating reels with trending audios, this was the most efficient way to reach new audiences and increase followers, as predicted from the research. I also found that an increase in reach and followers did not lead to a proportional increase in sales, as discussed later.

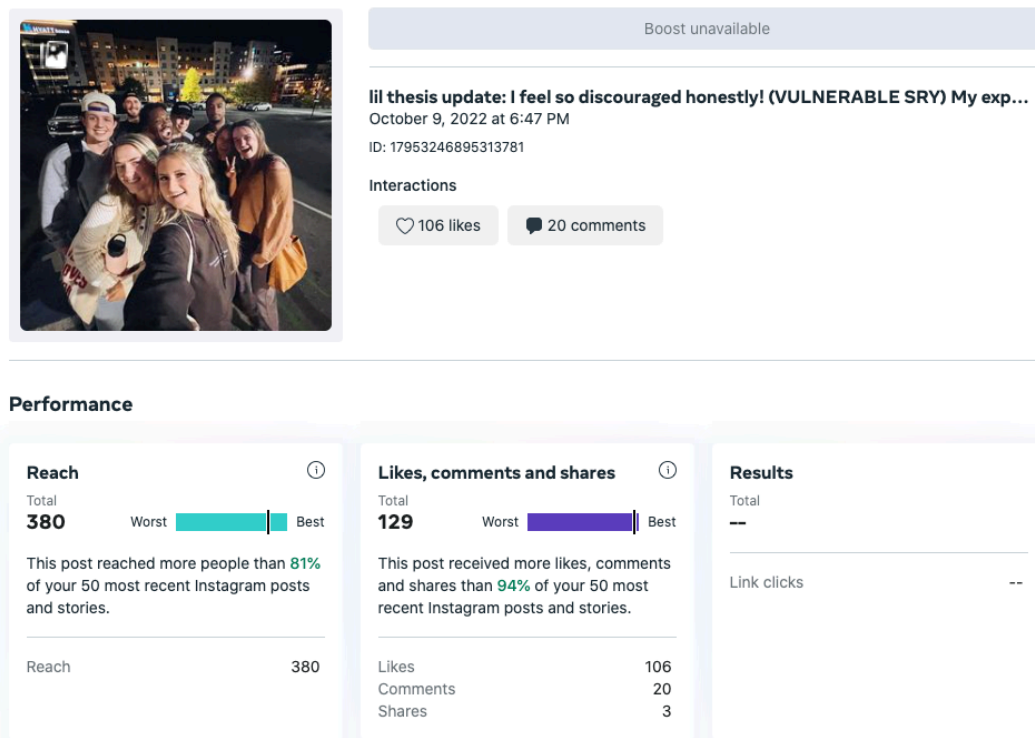


Figure 4: Top Performing Photo Post

The top-performing photo post, besides an outlier giveaway post which will be addressed later, was a carousel of images and videos including behind-the-scenes and personal content. I believe this post performed well because it included a vulnerable caption talking about the disappointment and difficulty I was facing coming to the analysis of this project as well as photos and videos of behind the scenes. The

engagement on the post, as seen in purple in the image above, was much higher than others because followers were commenting with encouragement as I expressed the difficulty of running the business. After this post, I had one new order and reached 411 accounts. The first post on Instagram included a caption of what the brand mission was and fears and excitement about the new venture. This was another post that performed well compared to others because engagement was higher from friends commenting with their excitement for me. The stark difference in reach with a top-performing photo post compared to top-performing reel post reveals the importance of using reels to reach new audiences. Both vulnerable posts proved to have higher reach and higher engagement, or comments and likes, which is a likely indicator that my followers felt as though they were a part of the journey with me and needed to encourage me in the process. There was also a positive correlation between the people who commented in an engaging way with my content and also made purchases and even repeat purchases with my brand.

Over the course of the last seven months, almost every still image post I made on Instagram specifically was liked by the same group of people. Many of these people included friends I already had, customers that purchased from me already, and other micro-influencers that reached out to my brand seeking free products. Customers messaged me on Instagram talking about their high school graduation, others about their relationships, some with excitement after they received a compliment in my brand, and many stories of people sharing with me how much the message on the t-shirt or hoodie encouraged them during a difficult moment. This communication shows that the followers on Instagram, or Gen Z, were connected to me as the brand owner and therefore were the same people posting when they wore SentibyAbi clothing. Brand

loyalty is shown through repeat orders from these customers as well as people sharing their pictures in SentibyAbi attire through messages, on TikTok, and on Instagram. As I create more designs, I believe the brand loyalty will become clearer because there will be more opportunity for repeat purchases. However, even with a limited number of designs, I have had many customers purchase two separate times from my website.

As mentioned earlier, the outlier post that performed the best in the photo/graphic category was a giveaway post.

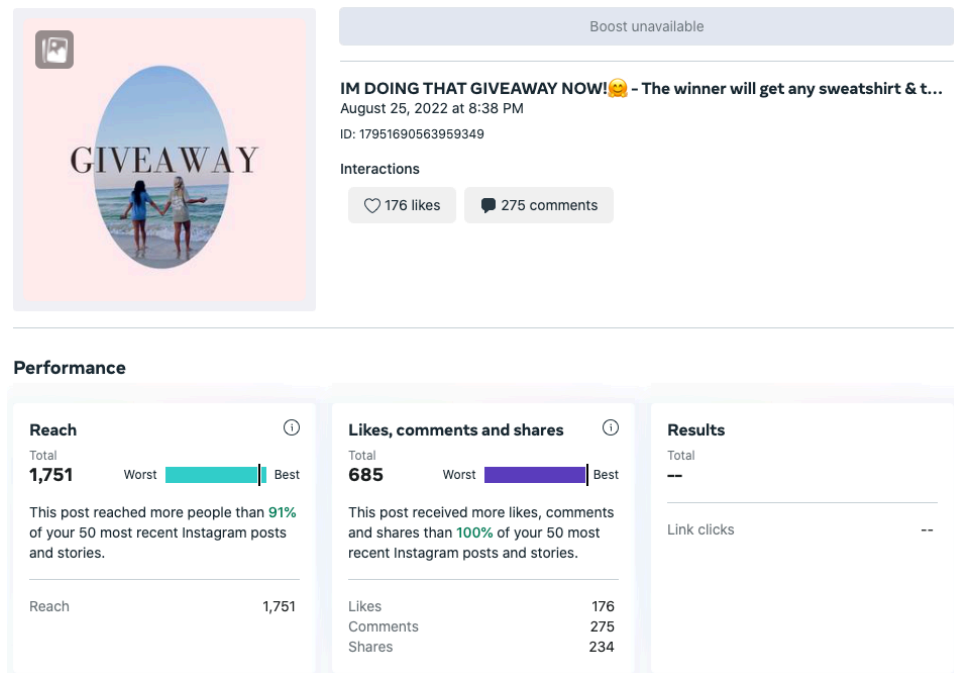


Figure 5: Outlier Top-Performing Giveaway Post

This type of post performs significantly better because people have an incentive to engage. To enter the giveaway for a free t-shirt and hoodie of choice, people had to tag three friends, follow @sentibyabi on Instagram, and share the post on their story. I also

created an ad for \$9.46 to boost this post for three days to new audiences that led to a reach of 924 accounts and 19 link clicks to my Instagram profile. The total reach for the post was 1,751 with 176 likes, 275 comments and 234 shares. This ad and the two others I created performed higher than organic posts as far as reach, but sales did not proportionally increase with reach as expected. I believe the lack of sales could be for various reasons, but one may be because there were zero reviews on the website for each product, which could feel suspicious for new followers who have not seen who I am and that I am selling reliable products. Also, as discussed in the research, Gen Z values authenticity and reviews are highly valued by Gen Z to see other 's honest opinions on a product. It could also be because of the price, lack of interest in the design, and hesitancy because of low follower count on Instagram. After low conversion on Instagram ads, I decided to create an ad on TikTok, and there were also zero new sales from this ad. Another way Gen Z likes to hear from people like them is through influencers.

As stated in the research, influencer marketing can be a great way to reach your ideal target audience in an effective and efficient way. For the case of my brand, I do not know how exactly the micro-influencers found my brand account on Instagram, but I had around 15 different people message me or apply through a program called Shopify Collabs (formerly called Dovetale). I did not accept every applicant, but the accounts I saw had high engagement and matched with my brand message, I sent either a free item or a discount code. The affiliate of Shopify collabs also received a special link to my website with their name at the end for sharing with their followers. Most of the users that applied had small follower counts of under 2,000, but I had a repeat sale from one of the members, 1 order from an affiliate link, and 17 page visits from affiliate links. I also

mailed a hoodie to an Instagram user with 11,400 followers in my niche of inspirational/Christian content. After she posted an image with the hoodie in the photo, I saw an increase of 19 followers within two days of her post. During the same period, my account reached 306 new visitors, so the ratio of follows to new visitors was only 6.21%. However, I did receive two new orders during this period, one directed from Instagram and one from direct Google search. Overall, for influencer marketing for SentibyAbi, I believe the exposure to other audiences was profitable and I know I received a few sales from affiliates that may not have occurred without their 20-40% discount.

TikTok Analysis



Figure 6: SentibyAbi TikTok Profile

For the TikTok account, I planned to post 3 videos per day for at least 5 days a week. I was not able to meet this goal because it was much more difficult and time-consuming than I had expected. I ended up posting sporadically with certain months or weeks more consistent than others for a total of 134 TikToks. Unfortunately, TikTok only allows a 60-day range of analytics, so from August 17th to October 17th, I posted 22

videos. The analytics are presented below with a total increase of 243 followers and 18,303 video views (figure 7).

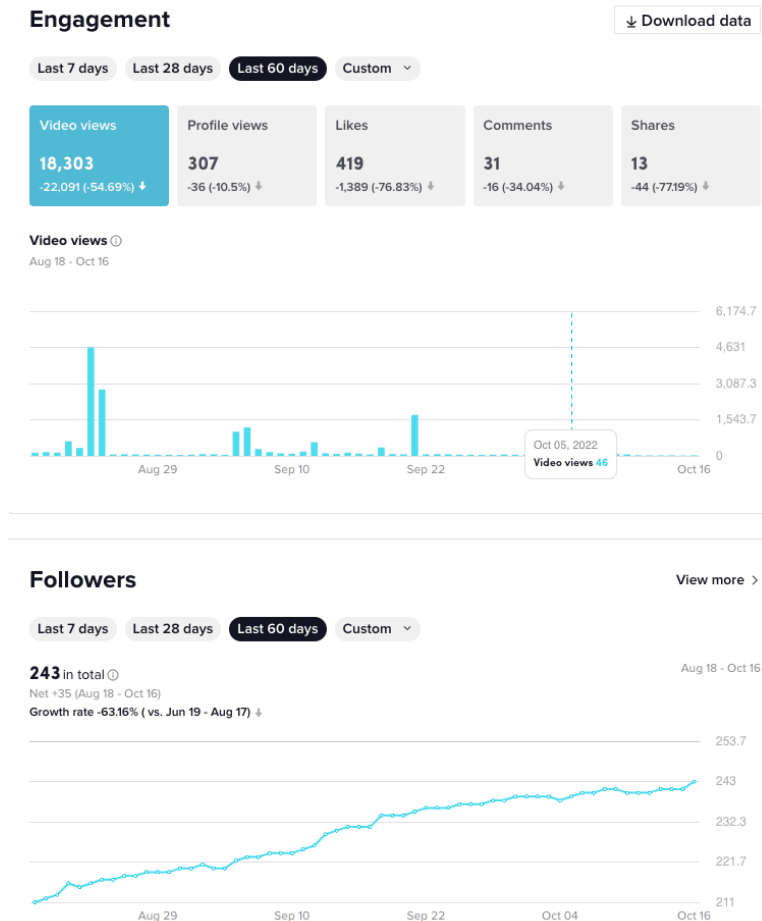


Figure 7: TikTok Analytics for August 18th to October 16th

TikTok views ranged from 37 views to 15,400 views with an average of around 300 to 1200 views for most videos. The likes on most videos were less than the equivalent, reels, on Instagram, and the comments were almost zero on TikTok. I believe that these differences are due to the amount of effort put into Instagram versus TikTok and the people I was reaching on each platform. With Instagram, for example, much of

the engagement came from friends and other local people who saw my brand on Instagram through a mutual friend. This was not always the case, as I did reach people from Germany, Australia, and other areas of the USA from micro-influencers reaching out and Instagram reel reach, but most conversations and sales came from locals. In contrast to Instagram, TikTok engagement and reach was mostly from people I did not know previously. According to the analytics on my website, TikTok referred 27 people and none of these visitors completed their checkout. I believe this could be for several reasons such as no or very few reviews of products leading to skepticism in purchasing, the price and shipping costs being too high, or a wrong targeting of demographic by TikTok's algorithm.

The TikTok algorithm works best when you engage on the app often so that it can understand the topics of interest for you and for the target audience you are hoping to reach. The analytics from the ad posted on TikTok help to better understand why the performance from this platform was lower. As pictured in figure 8, a larger majority of the audience TikTok targeted my ad to was males, which is not in line with my ideal target audience.

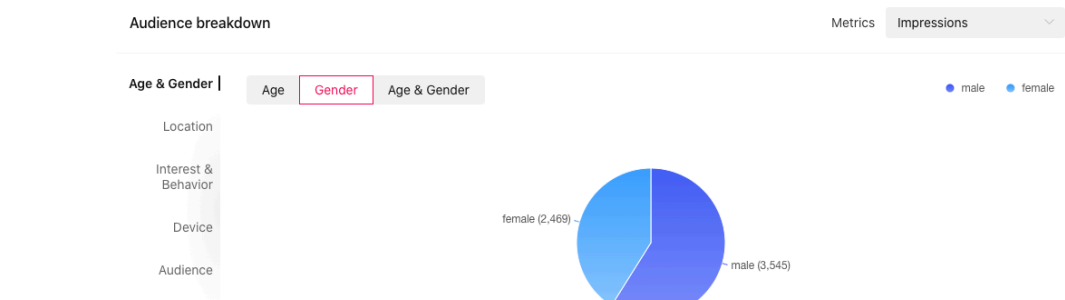


Figure 8: Breakdown of TikTok Ad Reach by Gender

Another issue with the targeting of the ad is seen in the topics of interest (figure 9) for the audience targeted. Apparel and accessories would likely rank number 1 or 2 if the targeting was more accurate for my TikTok ad, but it ranked number 6 under unrelated topics such as games, news and entertainment, apps, food and beverage, and e-commerce.

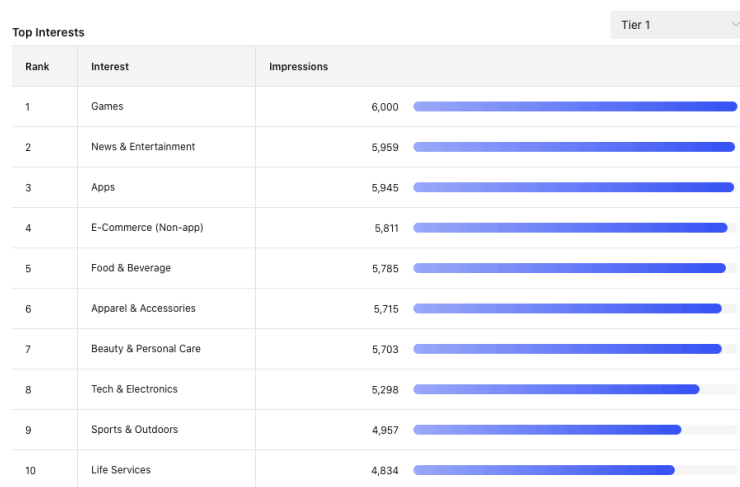


Figure 9: Breakdown of TikTok Ad Reach by Interests

From this data, I believe if I spent more time watching TikTok on my brand account, such as an hour at least a day, as well as posted more often and consistently, I would have different results from TikTok. For a business owner looking to use TikTok for their business, I would recommend spending sufficient time on the app watching content that relates to your product niche for the algorithm to understand your ideal audience. I would also recommend setting aside at least 2-3 hours a week to film and edit the videos whether that is all at once or broken down per day. For the future, I hope to spend more time intentionally on TikTok as well as setting a schedule for filming that

works for my personal schedule. To get a better understanding of how TikTok and Instagram performed as far as business sales, I will present analytics from my SentibyAbi website.

Website Analytics and Sales Based on Referral Source

From the date the website was active to the date of analysis, a period of about seven months, figure 10 reveals that Instagram was the largest referrer of visitors to the site compared to all other social media platforms.

Referrer name	Visitors	Sessions
	361	431
Instagram	278	347
Facebook	42	42
TikTok	27	27
Pinterest	13	14
LinkedIn	1	1

Figure 10: Website Visitors by Referral Source

Referrer source	Referrer name	Visitors	Sessions	Added to cart	Reached checkout	Conversion rate
Summary		1,765	2,191	128	130	1.37%
Unknown	N/A	29	30	1	17	3.33%
Social	Facebook	42	42	1	1	2.38%
Search	Google	80	87	15	17	2.30%
Direct	N/A	1,372	1,641	94	83	1.34%
Social	Instagram	278	347	15	11	1.15%
Social	Pinterest	13	14	2	0	0.00%
Social	LinkedIn	1	1	0	0	0.00%
Social	TikTok	27	27	0	1	0.00%
Search	Yahoo!	1	1	0	0	0.00%
Email	Gmail	1	1	0	0	0.00%

Figure 11: Website Visitors by Referral Source Including Cart Activity and Conversion Rate

Figure 11 reveals that 13% of total visitors reached SentibyAbi.com from Instagram. Of the 278 visitors, the conversion rate was 1.15% with 11 reaching checkout and 15 adding an item to their cart. As predicted from TikTok's low engagement, TikTok was significantly lower with only 1.3% of visitors from that platform and a 0% conversion rate. An unexpected finding revealed that Facebook was the second highest referrer of visitors and had a higher conversion rate than Instagram at 2.38%. This could be a topic of research for further study because most research states that Gen Z is not on Facebook and that TikTok is the next largest social media platform to grow your business. Although these numbers are small, it is clear that Instagram is still a strong platform to begin a business and drive sales. One caveat that makes predictions difficult is the fact that 1,372 visitors came from the source "direct," which means they entered the store's URL into their browser. These visitors could have heard of the brand from a friend, seen it on social media somewhere and visited with search, or searched my brand name from a pop-up booth I have in The Painted Tree located in Franklin, TN. Additionally, 29 visitors have a fully unknown source because of private browsing,

privacy firewalls, or other unknown reasons. Both groups of visitors have made up about 80% of the website traffic over the last 7 months, so as time progresses, more data will make analysis more relevant.

Discussion

Specific Performance By Content Type

The process of producing social media content includes more than simply posting a photograph or graphic or video, and each form of content performs differently as seen in the analytics from figure 12.

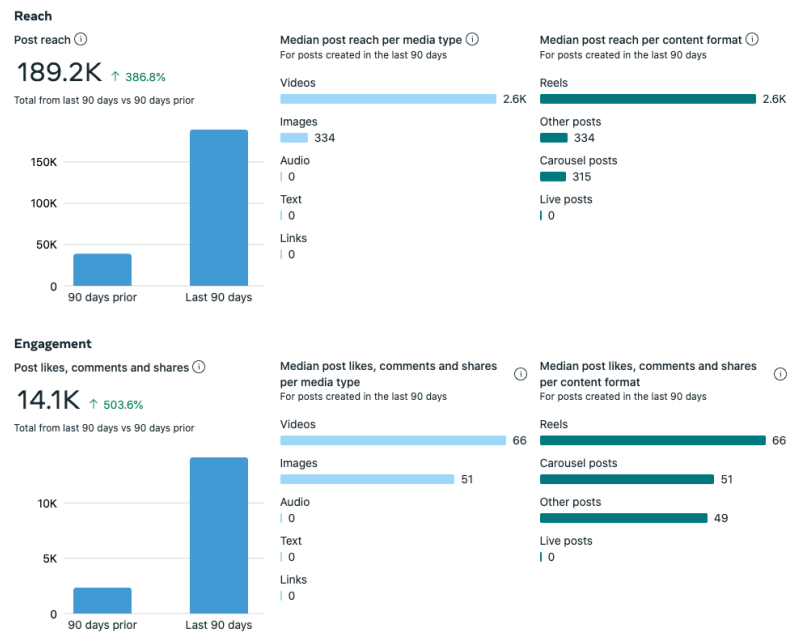


Figure 12: Instagram Reach and Engagement Categorized by Content Type

For Instagram, the photos should have a sense of cohesiveness across the page for aesthetic, graphics should provide value to the audience that is in line with the brand message and be shareable, and reels should be made with audio that is newer and not frequently used by other creators to reach the largest number of people. The graphics I posted often did not perform as well as photos, and the reels consistently performed the best as the research predicted. I also found that posting in the early morning between 6 a.m. to 9 a.m. or later in the evening, any time after 8 p.m. reached the largest number of people. These prime posting times performed the highest because this is likely when people are on social media the most during the week before and after work or classes.

One result, consistent with research, was that Instagram stories are where you can show up daily and be more personal with your followers. I used stories to ask for customers opinions on new products, I shared the nights I was on my floor all night making orders, I shared the moments of excitement when I received orders from Australia, and many other core memories with the intention of authenticity and transparency with my followers. The stories were therefore where most conversations began as followers comment and ask questions which led to a sense of being a part of the process. This connection formed the brand loyalty as revealed from repeat purchases and followers sharing their photos and videos in SentibyAbi apparel on their social medias.

On TikTok, there are fewer options in the type of content you can post because it is primarily a video sharing app. TikTok did release a stories feature in March of 2022, but it is not used as often or in the same way as Instagram. The videos posted late at night, such as 10 p.m. or later, performed better on TikTok which is likely for the same reason as Instagram: this is when people are on the app the most. When I posted a video

with trending audio on TikTok, it almost always reached a larger audience than when posting original audios, but there were a few videos, like my introduction video and educational videos, that had 400-500 views. The one “viral” TikTok I posted with 15,400 views, was with a trending audio and included a video of a couple dancing at the beach with the caption, “Pov: you’re sitting watching the ocean and see the sweetest couple slow dancing as their family cheers them on.” This video performed so well because the pov (point of view) trend is popular on TikTok and among Gen Z, I posted with a trending audio, and it evoked emotion in the viewer. Although this video had a large reach, there was not a subsequent increase in sales from the views. Another issue my advisor, Professor Raj Srivastava, mentioned was that in many of my TikToks, I made video clips move too quickly so viewers could not see the words on the hoodies and t-shirts. If the viewer cannot see the phrase on the clothing, they would likely have no intention of finding out how to purchase the product. This was one of the many lessons learned along the process of creating content for a brand on social media.

Social Media Content Creation and Marketing is Time Consuming

Through this process, I realized the tasks of this project and social media were more time-consuming than I had predicted. Planning for this project, I had goals of posting 2-3 TikToks a day and posting at least five times a week on Instagram, but as the months went on, I had a challenging time creating all the content every week. It was difficult to post this often for many reasons. First, each order is made to order, so for making new content, I would often have to cut the vinyl and heat-press a new product

because I did not want to make too many items for content, and someone order that hoodie size but with a different design. Second, I had to push myself to post even when the outcome felt so minimal. I would rarely get huge engagement and reach, so this was discouraging. Third, I was working part time in a job an hour from my home as well as extracurricular activities and studying for 15 hours of classes. Fourth, I realized that many times, near the beginning, I would not post anything for fear of it not being perfect, but eventually I realized the point that Gen Z values authenticity keeps me from the requirement of perfection on social media. Other factors such as traveling to London, Texas, Mexico, and Florida this summer and mental health issues with too much time on TikTok made it difficult to create as much content as needed.

TikTok is known for its addictive aspect, and by April 2022, U.S. citizens 18 years and older were spending an average of 45.8 minutes a day on TikTok as shown in figure 13.

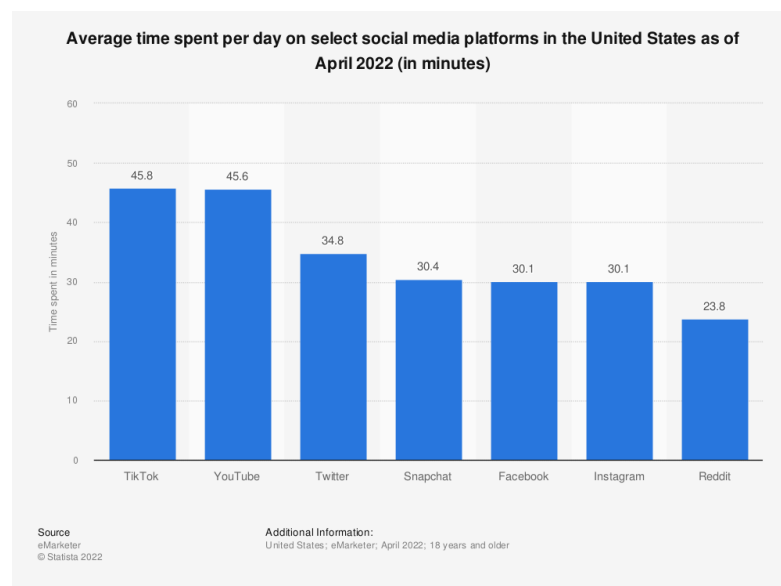


Figure 13: Time Spent on Social Media Platforms in the U.S. Per Day as of April 22.

Statista. 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1301075/us-daily-time-spent-social-media-platforms/>.

For TikTok, if a brand wants to stay current with the latest trends and software updates of the platform, they need to spend at least 45 minutes a day on TikTok with the rest of TikTok users. These users that spend 45 or more minutes a day are the ones who understand and engage with the TikTok trends that businesses can take advantage of for increased reach. Professor Srivastava, in the marketing department at Middle Tennessee State University, says he spends an average of two hours a day on TikTok to create enough content every week for his TikTok account. For full-time business owners and already established businesses with multiple employees, the tasks involved in social media marketing could be outsourced to a social media manager. However, for small business owners, this can consume a large amount of time on top of all the other responsibilities of running a business.

Social media managers often suggest planning the week or month ahead for your content because they recognize the time commitment it can be. This tactic was helpful for TikTok because of the time it takes to plan videos, get ready and film the video, and edit the video. If it takes an average of 25-30 minutes per short form video, that can add to around 10 hours a week to produce three videos a day. One caveat I found with this process of planning ahead is the fact that even when you only plan a week out, the trends on these platforms come and go so quickly. When you create a video with an audio that was trending on Monday for it to be posted even a week later, it may be too late to get

your video on the “for you” page because the audio becomes quickly saturated. The time commitment of TikTok alone proves the need for a social media manager that can focus on creating valuable content for your brand as well as staying up to date on trends and editing techniques.

Creating content for social media takes hours of time for what feels like a short lived and low return on investment, especially if your view is the immediate term. Social media marketing is a form of marketing that should be measured in more areas than simply direct sales. Social media is used by Gen Z to find new brands and build relationships with brands and their owners. After a brand significantly impacts their target audience on social media, loyal and long-term customers are more likely to derive from these social media interactions. It takes time to build relationships, and I have found the same to be true digitally. It takes time to build social media accounts as well as relationships with people on these accounts. I spoke with someone in my niche with 17,000 followers on his brand account and he said it took him 2 years to build up to where he is now. Another account I follow with 36,800 shared on her page that it took her 2 years to grow to that following as well. Everyone has a unique experience, but there is an important consideration in this 2-year mark that it takes time to grow on social media.

Conclusion

Through the process of starting a brand and working to grow on social media, I have learned more than what the scope of this thesis is. The research presented about Gen

Z and the preferences of this generation holds true. Authenticity as a brand owner and vulnerability with your followers can develop a connection with them that leads to purchases as well as relationships and positive word-of-mouth marketing. I was able to grow an Instagram account to a total of 654 followers and a TikTok account to 243 followers as of October 17th. I had sales in locations all over the United States and even Australia. I also had a request from someone in Germany about shipping costs because she wanted to make a purchase. I have been given the opportunity to set up booths for two local craft fairs and will be at another one on October 22nd. Overall, the business has been profitable, although not as profitable as hoped. Due to larger upfront costs of the Cricut for \$150 and the website for \$342 as well as smaller margins in hoodies and t-shirts with small volume, I did not break even until about August. I realized that I have so much more to learn and experiment with on social media. Other important digital marketing aspects to grow online include increasing your website SEO and posting products to digital marketplaces such as Amazon, Etsy, and Walmart.

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