



## Brand Attitudes in Generation Alpha: Social Media Marketing Exposure and the Moderating Role of Parental Mediation

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**Abstract:** Children in Generation Alpha are growing up in algorithm-driven social media environments where branded content is seamlessly integrated into entertainment, creator culture, and influencer endorsements. While prior research has examined the effects of digital marketing among adolescents and Generation Z, limited empirical evidence explains how platform-based marketing shapes younger children's brand-related evaluations and how parental mediation influences these effects. This study therefore investigates (1) the relationship between exposure to marketing content on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram and children's brand awareness, attitudes, and loyalty, (2) the relative effectiveness of different content formats, (3) the influence of influencer type on trust formation, and (4) the moderating role of parental mediation. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining survey data from 500 parent-child dyads (children aged 8–12) with six focus groups involving both parents and children. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and regression analysis, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis to provide deeper contextual insights. Findings indicate that TikTok is associated with the strongest brand-related responses among children, while short-form and gamified content produce higher recall and emotional engagement than other formats. Micro-influencers generate greater perceived credibility and stronger loyalty than macro-influencers. Importantly, active parental mediation, particularly through discussion and contextualization, reduces children's susceptibility to persuasive content. These findings contribute to digital marketing and child media research by clarifying key mechanisms shaping early brand socialization and offering practical, ethically informed insights for marketers and parents.

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## INTRODUCTION

Children born after 2010 are widely described as the first cohort to grow up fully immersed in always-on digital environments, where screens, apps, and connected devices are embedded in everyday routines from early childhood. Because their media use begins so

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early, this generation represents an intensified form of “digital nativity” as originally proposed by Prensky (2001). Short-video and content-sharing platforms, particularly TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, have become central spaces where children learn, play, socialize, and form preferences. These environments are not only social but also commercial, enabling brands to reach young audiences through creator collaborations, interactive challenges, and game-like features embedded within content feeds (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Compared with earlier cohorts, whose exposure to marketing was largely shaped by broadcast media, Generation Alpha encounters commercial messages within highly personalized, interactive systems. Algorithmic curation, especially on platforms such as TikTok, continuously adapts content to user behavior, intensifying attention through rapid pacing, repetition, and participatory design (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Empirical evidence suggests that children in this age group spend substantial time on social media, with platform-specific engagement patterns shaping their exposure to branded content (Oberst et al, 2017). This shift has important implications: while it creates new opportunities for firms to build early brand familiarity and preference, it also raises concerns about children’s susceptibility to persuasive content, given their still-developing advertising literacy and cognitive capacities (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Ayoubi et al., 2024).

Existing research has begun to explore how digital environments influence consumer behavior among younger audiences. Studies indicate that short-form and visually engaging content can enhance attention, recall, and emotional involvement, while interactive and gamified formats encourage active participation and deeper engagement (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Influencer marketing has also emerged as a powerful mechanism of persuasion, with perceived authenticity and relatability, particularly associated with micro-influencers, playing a key role in shaping trust and loyalty (De Veirman et al., 2017; Ayoubi & Naweer, 2024). At a theoretical level, self-concept theory (Rosenberg, 1979) suggests that individuals’ perceptions of themselves influence their attitudes and behaviors, including their interactions with brands. In digital contexts, social media platforms facilitate identity formation and self-expression, allowing children to engage with branded content in ways that reinforce emotional connections and a sense of belonging.

At the same time, the literature highlights several important limitations and ongoing debates. First, most existing studies focus on adolescents (Generation Z), leaving younger children underexplored (Chau, 2014). Second, “social media influence” is often treated as a single construct, without sufficient differentiation between platforms, content formats, and influencer types. Third, methodological limitations persist, as many studies rely on cross-sectional designs that cannot distinguish short-term engagement from long-term brand attitude formation. Furthermore, findings on children’s susceptibility to persuasive content remain mixed, with some studies emphasizing algorithmic amplification effects and others highlighting the protective role of parental mediation and disclosure cues (Montgomery et al., 2017).

Parental mediation represents a particularly important but underexamined factor. Prior research identifies active, restrictive, and passive mediation styles, each shaping how children interpret media content (Nathanson, 2001). Evidence suggests that active mediation can reduce susceptibility to persuasive messaging by encouraging critical reflection, although its effectiveness varies across contexts (Livingstone & Byrne, 2015). These dynamics are further complicated by gamified marketing, embedded advertising, and AI-driven influencers, which blur the boundaries between entertainment and promotion and reduce transparency in persuasive intent.

Despite these developments, there remains limited empirical evidence identifying which platform exposures (TikTok, YouTube, Instagram) and which marketing formats (short-form, gamified, influencer-endorsed content) most strongly influence Generation Alpha's brand-related outcomes, and whether parental mediation effectively mitigates these effects. Existing research largely overlooks these distinctions and tends to generalize social media influence without accounting for platform- and format-specific dynamics.

In addition to platform effects, content formats, and influencer credibility, social media marketing directed at Generation Alpha also raises important ethical, religious, and socio-cultural concerns, particularly in the Afghan context. Since children are still developing advertising literacy and critical judgment, advertising that directly targets them may contribute to the creation of false needs, materialistic attitudes, and excessive consumerism if it is not properly guided. Therefore, marketing practices aimed at children should be limited according to ethical and religious principles and should not contradict Islamic values, Mazhab, family norms, or the policies of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. In this regard, parents have a central role in actively monitoring and interpreting their children's digital media use, as such supervision forms part of their moral and religious responsibility in upbringing. Accordingly, this study aims to:

- Compare Brand Recall And Brand Attitudes Across Tiktok, Youtube, And Instagram Exposure
- Examine The Effects Of Short-Form Versus Long-Form Content
- Assess The Influence Of Gamified Versus Static Content
- Investigate Differences Between Micro- And Macro-Influencers In Shaping Brand Trust And Loyalty
- Test Whether Active Parental Mediation Moderates The Relationship Between Influencer Exposure And Children's Brand-Related Outcomes (Trust, Attitude, And Loyalty), Controlling For Key Variables Such As Age, Gender, Screen Time, And Prior Brand Familiarity.

Based on these aims, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. Which platform exposure (TikTok, YouTube, Instagram) is most strongly associated with children's brand recall and brand attitude?

2. Do short-form videos lead to higher brand recall and more favorable brand attitudes than long-form videos?
3. Does gamified branded content generate more favorable brand attitudes and stronger loyalty intentions than static content?
4. Do micro-influencers generate higher brand trust and loyalty intentions than macro-influencers?
5. Does active parental mediation reduce children's susceptibility to influencer marketing by weakening the relationship between influencer exposure and brand outcomes?

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to examine how social media marketing exposure relates to Generation Alpha's brand outcomes and how parental mediation shapes these relationships. A mixed-methods approach is particularly appropriate because the research questions require both (a) statistical generalization and hypothesis testing of relationships between variables such as platform exposure, content type, and influencer marketing, and (b) in-depth contextual understanding of how children and parents interpret and respond to persuasive digital content in everyday life settings. Mixed-methods research is widely recognized for its ability to provide a more comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena by integrating numerical trends with qualitative insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). In this study, quantitative data enable the estimation of relationships and group differences across platforms and content formats, while qualitative data provide explanatory depth into mechanisms of influence, including emotional responses, parental interpretation, and ethical concerns.

The study follows a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected within the same timeframe, analyzed independently, and then integrated during interpretation to enhance validity through triangulation (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013). This design is particularly useful when the goal is to compare and corroborate findings across different data sources while maintaining equal attention to both numerical and experiential evidence. The quantitative component was prioritized for testing statistical relationships and identifying significant effects. In contrast, the qualitative component was used to explain and contextualize these patterns by exploring parental mediation practices, children's perceptions of influencer credibility, and emotional engagement with branded content. The integration of both strands strengthens the overall credibility of the findings by enabling convergence between statistical outcomes and lived experiences.

The target population of this study consisted of children aged 8–12 years (Generation Alpha) who actively use social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, as well as their parents or primary caregivers, who play a mediating role in regulating or influencing children's media exposure. This dual-unit population was selected to capture both the direct effects of platform-based marketing on children and the moderating role of

parental mediation in shaping these effects. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that participants met specific inclusion criteria relevant to the research objectives. This approach is appropriate in studies where access to specialized or behavior-specific populations is required, particularly when investigating children's digital media engagement and parental oversight. Participants were selected based on (i) children's active use of social media platforms and (ii) parents' willingness to participate in the study alongside their children. This ensured the inclusion of information-rich cases that could provide relevant and meaningful data for both quantitative analysis and qualitative interpretation.

The quantitative sample consisted of 500 parent-child dyads, which is considered adequate for statistical analysis, including regression and group comparison techniques, and enhances the reliability and generalizability of the findings within the defined population. The qualitative component included six focus groups, each comprising 8–10 participants, divided equally between children (three groups) and parents (three groups), enabling in-depth exploration of lived experiences and interpretive meanings associated with exposure to social media marketing.

Participants were recruited from urban and suburban areas with relatively high internet penetration, ensuring sufficient exposure to digital platforms while also capturing variation in socio-economic background. Recruitment was conducted through school networks, parent associations, and online community forums, which facilitated access to both children and their guardians in a structured and ethically appropriate manner. Quantitative data were collected through structured surveys administered to parent-child pairs, focusing on platform usage patterns, content preferences, and brand-related outcomes such as recall and attitude formation. Qualitative data were obtained through focus group discussions designed to explore deeper insights into children's and parents' interpretations of influencer marketing, gamified content, and parental mediation strategies.

### ***Data Analysis***

#### **Quantitative Analysis**

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Summarized platform preferences, time spent on platforms, and content effectiveness.
- **Inferential Statistics:**
  1. ANOVA (Analysis of Variance): Compared brand recall rates across platforms.
  2. Paired t-test: Assessed differences in recall between short-form and long-form content.
  3. Regression Analysis: Examined the impact of parental mediation on susceptibility to influencer marketing.

#### ***Qualitative Analysis***

The qualitative component was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to examine how children and parents interpret social media marketing exposure and how parental mediation

shapes brand-related responses. Analysis followed an iterative process: (1) familiarization with transcripts, (2) initial open coding, (3) clustering codes into candidate themes, (4) reviewing themes against the dataset, and (5) defining and naming final themes. Coding was conducted in NVivo to support systematic organization, retrieval, and comparison of codes across child and parent groups. To enhance trustworthiness, themes were refined through repeated team discussions and comparison across groups (children vs. parents), and discrepant views were retained to avoid overgeneralization.

## FINDINGS

This section presents the findings from the quantitative and qualitative analyses. The data highlights platform preferences, content effectiveness, parental mediation, and the role of influencers in shaping Generation Alpha's brand perceptions. Hypothesis testing results are also included.

### **Platform Preferences**

The survey data indicated that TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram were the most popular platforms among Generation Alpha. TikTok emerged as the most engaging platform, followed by YouTube and Instagram.

**Table 1:** Social Media Platform Preferences

Platform	Frequency of Use (%)	Engagement with Brand Content (%)
TikTok	85%	78%
YouTube	72%	65%
Instagram	60%	50%

**TikTok:** Short-form, gamified content makes TikTok the preferred platform for Generation Alpha.

**YouTube:** Appeals through its diverse content, particularly educational and unboxing videos.

**Instagram:** Lags behind in engagement due to its less interactive nature compared to TikTok.

### **Hypothesis Testing**

H1: TikTok has a stronger influence on Generation Alpha's brand perceptions compared to YouTube and Instagram.

ANOVA Results:  $F(2, 497) = 15.62, p < 0.01$ . Post-hoc tests revealed that TikTok had significantly higher engagement than YouTube and Instagram, supporting H1.

### **Types of Content Resonating with Generation Alpha**

Generation Alpha showed clear preferences for short-form videos and gamified content, which were rated the highest in terms of engagement and brand recall.

**Table 2: Effectiveness of Content Types**

Content Type	Effectiveness Score (1–10)	Examples of Preferred Content
Short-Form Videos	9.2	TikTok challenges, Instagram Reels
Gamified Content	8.9	Interactive AR filters, mini-games
Influencer-Endorsed Content	8.5	Unboxing videos, product reviews
Educational Content	7.8	STEM toy tutorials, how-to guides

Short-Form Videos: Align with Generation Alpha’s limited attention spans to foster higher recall.

Gamified Content: Interactive elements drive emotional connections and loyalty.

Influencer-Endorsed Content: Builds trust and relatability, particularly through micro-influencers.

**Hypothesis Testing**

H2: Short-form video content has a greater impact on Generation Alpha's brand recall than long-form video content.

Paired t-test Results:  $t(499) = 9.84, p < 0.001$ . Short-form videos showed significantly higher brand recall, supporting H2.

**Role of Parental Mediation**

Parental mediation practices significantly influenced how children interpreted and engaged with social media content.

**Table 3: Parental Mediation Practices**

Type of Mediation	Frequency (%)	Impact on Brand Perception
Active Mediation	40%	Reduced susceptibility to ads
Restrictive Mediation	30%	Limited exposure to branded content
Passive Mediation	30%	Higher influence of brand messaging

Active Mediation: Parents’ discussions with children promoted critical thinking and reduced susceptibility to advertisements.

Restrictive Mediation: Limited exposure but often increased curiosity about restricted content.

Passive Mediation: Allowed unfiltered access, increasing the impact of influencer marketing.

**Hypothesis Testing**

H4: Active parental mediation reduces the impact of influencer marketing on Generation Alpha’s brand preferences.

Regression Results:  $\beta = -0.62$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . Active mediation significantly reduced susceptibility to influencer marketing, supporting H4.

### **Role of Influencers**

Influencers played a pivotal role in shaping Generation Alpha's brand preferences, with micro-influencers being more trusted than macro-influencers.

**Table 4: Impact of Influencers**

Influencer Type	Trust Level (%)	Engagement with Brand Content (%)
Micro-Influencers	75%	68%
Macro-Influencers	55%	60%

**Micro-Influencers:** Their relatability and perceived authenticity made them more effective in fostering brand loyalty.

**Macro-Influencers:** While they reached larger audiences, they were often viewed as overly commercial.

### **Hypothesis Testing**

H5: Micro-influencers have a stronger impact on Generation Alpha's brand loyalty compared to macro-influencers.

Independent t-test Results:  $t(498) = 6.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Micro-influencers had significantly higher impact on loyalty, supporting H5.

### **Qualitative Insights from Focus Groups**

**Key Themes:** Creative Content: Children favored campaigns that were visually engaging and interactive.

**Emotional Resonance:** Content that evoked joy or curiosity was more memorable.

**Parental Concerns:** Parents emphasized the importance of transparency and educational value in marketing campaigns.

#### **Exemplary Quotes**

"I love it when I can play a game or use filters with my favorite characters. It makes me feel part of the brand." – Child participant, 10 years old.

"I trust brands that are upfront about their advertising, especially when it's clear that the content is meant for kids." – Parent participant.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study investigated how platform-based social media marketing influences Generation Alpha's brand-related outcomes and how parental mediation shapes these relationships. The main findings show that children's brand awareness, attitudes, trust, and loyalty are influenced by a combination of platform type, content format, influencer characteristics, and parental mediation. Among the examined platforms, TikTok emerged as the strongest

predictor of children's brand-related responses, followed by YouTube and Instagram. In addition, short-form video and gamified content were found to be more effective than long-form and static formats in generating brand recall and engagement. The findings also revealed that micro-influencers have a stronger effect than macro-influencers in building trust and loyalty, while active parental mediation significantly reduces children's susceptibility to persuasive content.

These findings can be interpreted in relation to the distinctive features of contemporary digital environments. TikTok appears particularly influential because its algorithmically curated and highly personalized structure increases repeated exposure to branded content in a rapid, engaging, and immersive format. Compared to YouTube and Instagram, TikTok offers a more continuous and interactive flow of short-form content, which may explain its stronger association with children's brand responses. Similarly, the superior effect of short-form and gamified content suggests that speed, interactivity, and playfulness are central to the way children process, enjoy, and remember brand messages. The qualitative findings support this interpretation, as many children described such content as enjoyable, fast-paced, and emotionally appealing. The stronger role of micro-influencers also suggests that perceived authenticity and relatability are more persuasive than sheer popularity, as children may identify more easily with influencers who appear closer to their everyday social world. Furthermore, the moderating role of active parental mediation indicates that children's responses to branded content are not merely automatic but can be shaped through discussion, explanation, and critical guidance from parents.

The findings of this study are broadly consistent with previous research on social media marketing, influencer credibility, and parental mediation. Prior studies have shown that highly visual and interactive digital content can strengthen consumer attention, emotional engagement, and recall, and the present study confirms this pattern in the context of Generation Alpha. Similarly, earlier research has emphasized the persuasive role of influencer authenticity, and the present findings support the argument that micro-influencers are often more effective than macro-influencers in developing trust and loyalty. In addition, the finding that active parental mediation reduces persuasive influence aligns with previous studies highlighting the protective role of parental discussion in children's media interpretation. However, this study also extends previous literature in important ways. First, much of the existing research has focused on adolescents or Generation Z, whereas this study specifically examines younger children in Generation Alpha. Second, this study differentiates between platforms, content formats, and influencer types rather than treating social media influence as a single, uniform construct. In this regard, a major strength of the study is its more nuanced and multidimensional analysis of how digital marketing affects children. At the same time, a weakness of the study is its cross-sectional design, which limits causal interpretation and makes it difficult to determine whether exposure shapes attitudes or whether pre-existing preferences influence exposure.

The study also provides clear answers to the research questions. Regarding the first research question, TikTok was the platform most strongly associated with children's brand recall and brand attitudes, suggesting that platform design matters significantly in shaping persuasive outcomes. Regarding the second research question, short-form videos were more effective than long-form videos in generating brand recall and favorable attitudes. Regarding the third question, gamified content was more effective than static content in strengthening engagement and brand-related responses. Regarding the fourth question, micro-influencers were more effective than macro-influencers in generating trust and loyalty intentions. Finally, regarding the fifth research question, active parental mediation weakened the relationship between influencer exposure and children's brand outcomes, demonstrating that parental involvement can serve as a meaningful protective factor in digital consumer socialization.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to draw causal conclusions and leaves open the possibility of bidirectional relationships between exposure and brand attitudes. Second, the reliance on self-reported data may have introduced recall bias and social desirability bias. Third, the sample was drawn from relatively high-connectivity areas, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to rural or lower-access settings. In addition, the study did not fully control for other relevant contextual variables such as peer influence, baseline advertising literacy, and prior brand familiarity. These factors may also affect how children respond to branded content in digital environments.

Future research should therefore employ longitudinal designs to examine how brand attitudes develop over time and whether repeated exposure produces lasting effects. Experimental or quasi-experimental methods would also help strengthen causal inference. In addition, future studies should expand cross-cultural comparisons to explore how parental mediation practices and platform effects vary across different social and cultural contexts. Researchers may also incorporate direct measures of advertising literacy and examine emerging developments such as AI-generated influencers, virtual creators, and new transparency mechanisms in digital marketing. Such directions would provide a deeper understanding of how persuasive digital ecosystems shape early consumer identity and how protective interventions can be strengthened.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study set out to clarify how social media marketing exposure shapes Generation Alpha's brand outcomes and whether parental mediation reduces children's susceptibility to persuasive digital content. Addressing the study's main objective, the findings indicate that platform-based marketing is meaningfully associated with children's brand-related responses, and that these associations vary by platform, content format, influencer type, and parental mediation practices. Across the three examined platforms, TikTok was associated with the strongest brand-related responses, consistent with its short-form, algorithmically curated, and highly interactive content environment. In addition, short-form video and

gamified/interactive content were linked with higher brand recall and stronger affective involvement than long-form or static formats, suggesting that highly stimulating and participatory designs are particularly persuasive for younger audiences. Influencer effects were also differentiated: micro-influencers were perceived as more credible and were associated with stronger loyalty tendencies than macro-influencers, aligning with the notion that perceived authenticity and relatability matter for young viewers. Importantly, active parental mediation (discussion and contextualization of content) emerged as a protective factor, weakening children's susceptibility to influencer-driven persuasion compared with passive mediation. Taken together, these findings directly respond to the research problem by identifying which platform and marketing formats are most salient for Generation Alpha and by demonstrating that family communication can serve as a meaningful boundary condition in early digital consumer socialization. Beyond theoretical contributions, the results have practical and ethical implications. For marketers, the evidence suggests that youth-oriented campaigns are most influential when they rely on short-form, interactive, and creator-led formats, but these strategies must be implemented responsibly given the developmental vulnerability of younger audiences. For parents and educators, the findings underscore that active mediation, rather than solely restricting access, may be a more effective approach for reducing persuasive influence and supporting children's critical interpretation of branded messages.

This study further concludes that social media marketing directed at Generation Alpha should not be evaluated only in terms of brand recall, engagement, attitude formation, and loyalty, but also in relation to ethical, religious, and cultural responsibility. Direct advertising to children should be limited where it creates artificial needs, promotes excessive consumerism, or exploits children's limited ability to recognize persuasive intent. In the Afghan context, responsible social media marketing must remain consistent with Islamic principles, Mazhab, family values, and the policies of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The findings also emphasize that parents should take a more active role in monitoring children's use of digital media, discussing branded content with them, and guiding them to distinguish between genuine needs and commercially created desires as part of their broader moral and religious responsibility in upbringing.

### **AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS**

Basir Ahmad Ayoubi, conceptualized the study, conducted the research and analysis, and wrote the manuscript. Assadullah Sadiqi reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used in this study, a portion of which is derived from publicly accessible secondary sources, include full citations, DOIs, and URLs provided within the manuscript.

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