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Digital-Cultural Verification Of Brand Authenticity Among Indonesian Generation Z: A Youtube-Based Netnography And Digital Elicitation Study

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Abstract

This study explains how Indonesian Generation Z consumers verify brand authenticity in platformed consumer discourse. Instead of treating authenticity as a stable brand attribute or a managerial claim, the study conceptualizes authenticity as an evaluative achievement produced through scrutiny of public comments, operational proof, creator credibility, cultural legitimacy, and conditional support. The research employed a YouTube-based qualitative netnography, supplemented by digital elicitation interviews. The YouTube corpus began with 61 candidate videos and 4,241 public comments. After relevance screening and cleaning, the analysis retained 17 videos, 2,562 substantive comments, and 524 theoretically rich excerpts for close coding. The interview layer included 32 Indonesian Gen Z participants aged 18-27, with 18 extended elicitation interviews and 14 confirmatory interviews. A Gioia-inspired coding structure, supported by reflexive thematic analysis, identified six linked themes: peer comments as counter-promotional evidence, operational proof as an authenticity test, local pride as conditional rather than automatic support, reciprocal cultural participation, candor as creator credibility, and reversible trust under value-action gaps. The study contributes to brand authenticity theory by shifting attention from authenticity as perceived genuineness to authenticity as digital-cultural verification. It also extends debates on consumer culture, eWOM, influencer credibility, and purpose-washing by showing how Indonesian Gen Z

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consumers assess localness, sustainability, cultural symbolism, and moral claims through evidence-seeking platform routines.

Keywords: brand authenticity; Generation Z; netnography; YouTube comments; cultural embeddedness; influencer credibility; greenwashing; woke washing; Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Brand authenticity has moved from a managerial ideal to a public test performed inside platformed consumer culture. Recent studies no longer treat authenticity only as heritage, sincerity, or continuity; they increasingly connect it with sustainability messaging, influencer credibility, brand activism, online reviews, and consumer skepticism (Eggers et al., 2022; Bulmer et al., 2024; Walter et al., 2024; Caruelle, 2025). This shift matters because digital consumers rarely evaluate a brand claim in isolation. They compare the claim with user comments, creator reviews, visible operational evidence, and the moral tone of peer discussion.

The recent literature also shows that authenticity has become more fragile. Sustainability communication can strengthen authenticity when consumers perceive consistency among message, evidence, and practice, yet the same communication can invite accusations of greenwashing when evidence remains thin (Bulmer et al., 2024; Sajid et al., 2024). Purpose-driven and activist branding faces an even sharper test. Authentic brand purpose can improve credibility, while woke washing and misaligned corporate practice damage trust when audiences read moral positioning as opportunistic (Ahmad et al., 2024; Walter et al., 2024; Xue & Mattila, 2024; Caruelle, 2025; Mahmud & Guzman, 2025). The problem, therefore, is not whether brands should communicate values. The problem is whether consumers can verify those values against conduct.

Generation Z intensifies this verification logic. Recent studies on Gen Z and brand activism show that younger consumers do not uniformly reward corporate activism; they ask whether brand engagement with social issues looks credible, consistent, and supported by action (Cammarota & Branca, 2025; O'Sullivan et al., 2026). Indonesian evidence points in the same direction. Pratiwi et al. (2025) show that user-generated content and influencer communication shape Gen Z purchase intention through brand awareness rather than simple direct persuasion. Lim and Keni (2025) find that user-generated content and brand awareness matter more than influencer credibility in a Jabodetabek skincare context. Fitriani et al. (2025) further show that influencer

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authenticity and brand authenticity matter for Gen Z purchase intention in Indonesia. Taken together, these studies suggest that Gen Z consumers do not merely consume brand stories. They test how stories travel through peer discourse, creator credibility, and platform evidence.

Online review research gives this study a specific empirical entry point. Recent Indonesian work on fashion e-commerce shows that perceived review credibility and review importance shape consumers' intention to use online reviews in purchase decisions (Darsana & Setiobudi, 2025). This supports a broader shift in eWOM research: comments do not simply convey opinions; they function as a consumer-built infrastructure for assessing credibility. In YouTube comment threads, consumers can question price, quality, production source, creator sponsorship, and the sincerity of local or sustainable claims. The comment thread becomes a public site of brand verification.

Influencer research reinforces this point. Recent meta-analytic work shows that influencer effects depend on antecedents such as credibility and fit rather than exposure alone (Han & Balabanis, 2024). Studies on influencer avoidance among Gen Z also show that young consumers can reject both influencers and endorsed brands when persuasion looks inauthentic or overly commercial (Pradhan et al., 2023). This line of research helps explain why participants in the present study repeatedly looked for usable imperfections: honest limitations, side effects, product comparisons, disclosure, and reviewer candor. Flawless enthusiasm often becomes suspicious rather than persuasive.

The cultural dimension remains underdeveloped in this newer scholarship. Foundational authenticity studies provide important measurement anchors through sincerity, heritage, quality commitment, continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism (Napoli et al., 2014; Morhart et al., 2015). Nevertheless, recent studies on sustainability, activism, greenwashing, online reviews, and Indonesian Gen Z rarely explain how cultural embeddedness changes the very content of authenticity. In emerging markets, local pride, religious sensitivity, regional identity, community participation, and domestic production can become authenticity cues. They can also become triggers of skepticism when consumers interpret them as symbolic borrowing.

Indonesia provides a compelling context because local brands operate inside dense digital, cultural, and moral economies. Local pride can encourage support for domestic products, but it can also create suspicion when consumers see imported relabelling, poor quality, unverified sustainability claims, or superficial use of cultural symbols. Recent Indonesian studies on Gen Z digital marketing, influencer and brand authenticity, online review credibility, and brand activism confirm that trust increasingly

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depends on credibility, authenticity, and culturally resonant evidence rather than one-way promotion (Pratiwi et al., 2025; Fitriani et al., 2025; Ulza, 2025; Darsana & Setiobudi, 2025; Lim & Keni, 2025). Yet these studies remain mostly survey-based. They tell us that authenticity matters, but they tell us less about how consumers perform authenticity verification in naturally occurring digital discourse.

This article addresses that gap through a YouTube-based qualitative netnography supported by digital elicitation interviews with Indonesian Gen Z consumers. It asks: How do Indonesian Gen Z consumers verify brand authenticity through digital and cultural cues in YouTube-based consumer discourse? The study develops the concept of digital-cultural verification to explain how consumers move from brand-facing claims to peer scrutiny, operational proof, cultural legitimacy, influencer credibility, and conditional advocacy or backlash.

The article contributes in three ways. First, it advances scholarship on brand authenticity by showing how recent concerns about purpose-washing, influencer skepticism, user-generated content, and review credibility reshape older dimensions of authenticity in platformed markets. Second, it identifies cultural legitimacy as a mechanism by which Indonesian Gen Z consumers distinguish local pride from local cultural washing. Third, it extends eWOM and influencer research by showing that comments and reviews do not merely influence attitudes; they also serve as collective spaces for verifying authenticity.

Theoretical Background

Brand authenticity as interpreted consistency

Brand authenticity research has always contained a productive tension between brand intention and consumer interpretation. A firm may design heritage narratives, claim sincerity, or emphasize craft, but consumers decide whether those claims hold together. Beverland (2005) showed how authenticity can support premium meanings in luxury wine, yet Beverland and Farrelly (2010) also demonstrated that consumers select authenticity cues to pursue desired experiences. Authenticity, therefore, does not reside solely in the product. It emerges when consumers connect cues, histories, performances, and meanings.

Napoli et al. (2014) and Morhart et al. (2015) provide robust measurement anchors for the field. Their work directs attention to sincerity, heritage, quality commitment, continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism. Schallehn et al. (2014) further position authenticity as the fit between brand identity and brand behavior. Nevertheless, these

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dimensions require reinterpretation in platformed settings. Continuity now includes cross-platform consistency. Integrity includes alignment between public claims and visible operations. Heritage includes not only past origin but also current contribution. Symbolism becomes risky when consumers suspect cultural extraction or borrowed local identity.

This study, therefore, treats brand authenticity as interpreted consistency under public scrutiny. Consumers ask whether a brand's message, product performance, cultural positioning, creator review, and public reputation support one another. When those elements align, authenticity can strengthen trust. When they conflict, authenticity collapses into perceived manipulation.

Cultural embeddedness and local legitimacy

Consumer Culture Theory provides the cultural lens for the study. Holt (2002) argues that brands draw meaning from cultural systems, identity projects, and social tensions rather than from managerial messaging alone. Steenkamp (2019) and Strizhakova and Coulter (2015) show that global and local brand meanings depend on contextual forces. Özsomer (2012) adds that local iconness can interact with global appeal. These arguments matter because Indonesian Gen Z consumers do not evaluate localness as a simple geographic label. They examine whether local language, cultural symbols, regional narratives, domestic capability, and community participation make sense together.

Cultural embeddedness can strengthen authenticity by signaling rootedness, reciprocity, and local contribution. At the same time, cultural embeddedness can expose a brand to sharper criticism. A batik motif, regional story, or local pride slogan can look authentic when it makes local producers visible and distributes benefits. The same cue can look opportunistic when the brand uses culture only as a visual asset. This tension moves the analysis beyond a romantic view of local brands. Cultural symbolism becomes persuasive only when consumers read it as culturally legitimate.

WOM, YouTube comments, and creator credibility

Electronic word-of-mouth research explains why public comments matter. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) and Cheung and Thadani (2012) show that consumers use peer opinions because they supply credibility beyond corporate communication. Muntinga et al. (2011) further show that consumers consume, contribute to, and create brand-related content. In YouTube review environments, comment threads perform more than a

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feedback role. They help viewers verify whether the video, the influencer, the brand claim, and the user experience agree.

Influencer credibility research adds another layer. Lou and Yuan (2019) connect influencer credibility and message value to consumer trust in branded content. Campbell and Farrell (2020) show that influencer marketing works through specific functional components rather than celebrity visibility alone. The present study extends that discussion by showing that Indonesian Gen Z participants did not automatically reject influencers. They trusted creators who disclosed flaws, compared alternatives, clearly mentioned sponsorship, and avoided flawless enthusiasm. In this setting, candor became more persuasive than polished positivity.

Purpose-washing, woke washing, and reversible trust

Research on brand activism and purpose-washing explains why moral or cultural claims create reputational risk. Vredenburg et al. (2020) distinguish authentic brand activism from woke washing by aligning purpose, values, messaging, and practice. Wagner et al. (2009), Du et al. (2010), and Walter et al. (2024) converge on the same mechanism: consumers infer motive and punish inconsistency when prosocial claims look instrumental. Aisy et al. (2025) broadens this issue across greenwashing, femwashing, rainbowwashing, and wokewashing. The present study uses this literature as a sensitizing frame, but it also asks whether Indonesian Gen Z consumers recognize adjacent forms of symbolic misalignment beyond formal activist branding.

Indonesian digital discourse widens the family of authenticity failures. Consumers discussed greenwashing when ecological claims lacked proof. They discussed local-cultural washing, in which brands borrowed regional or domestic identity without contributing. They discussed influencer washing when sponsored messages appeared to be personal recommendations. These failures did not simply reduce purchase intention. They made trust reversible. Consumers who once supported a brand could shift toward criticism, avoidance, or talk of boycotts when they detected a value-action gap.

Methods

The study employed a YouTube-based qualitative netnography, supplemented by digital elicitation interviews. Netnography suits this research because it examines naturally occurring online discourse and treats digital interaction as a meaningful social field (Kozinets, 2010, 2020). The design did not aim to mine social media at scale. It

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aimed to develop an interpretive explanation of how consumers evaluate authenticity through public comments, review videos, and elicited interpretations from Gen Z.

The research used two data layers. The first layer consisted of public YouTube comments from brand-related videos. A Python-assisted search identified videos using Indonesian and English search keys that reflected the research focus: review jujur brand lokal, brand lokal viral Indonesia, brand lokal budaya Indonesia, brand lokal sustainability, brand Indonesia greenwashing, brand lokal overrated, brand lokal worth it, brand skincare lokal jujur, brand fashion lokal Indonesia, produk lokal viral TikTok, influencer review brand lokal, and boikot brand Indonesia. The search returned 61 candidate videos. Automated metadata and relevance filters selected 30 videos, and comment retrieval succeeded for 23 videos. A manual topical audit then retained 17 videos directly related to brand authenticity, local branding, review credibility, cultural heritage, sustainability, or boycott discourse.

The initial YouTube corpus contained 4,241 public comments. The relevance audit retained 3,085 comments from the 17 relevant videos. The first cleaning stage removed very short comments, emoji-only responses, greetings, pure spam, promotional noise, and comments that did not address brand, product, creator, claims, localness, quality, or value issues. This stage produced 2,562 substantive comments. The researchers then selected 524 theoretically rich excerpts for close coding because they contained evaluative reasoning about authenticity, trust, skepticism, local pride, sourcing, sustainability, creator credibility, or backlash.

The second data layer consisted of digital elicitation interviews with Indonesian Gen Z participants aged 18-27. Two interviewers collected 32 interviews: 18 extended elicitation interviews and 14 shorter confirmatory interviews. The extended interviews included students, young professionals or recent graduates, active review content users, and consumers who had previously supported or rejected brands because of sustainability, boycotts, local pride, or perceived inconsistency. Participants discussed their digital review routines, interpreted anonymized YouTube comments, and explained how they judge authenticity, cultural symbols, influencer credibility, trust, advocacy, and backlash.

The study used the interviews to strengthen interpretation rather than to replace the netnographic corpus. This decision addresses a central limitation of public YouTube comments: they rarely verify commenters' ages or demographics. The article, therefore, treats the comment corpus as Gen Z-relevant consumer discourse, while the elicitation

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interviews provide direct evidence of how Indonesian Gen Z consumers interpret similar discourse.

The analysis followed a Gioia-inspired structure (Gioia et al., 2013) combined with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). First, the researchers coded comments and interview segments using informant-centered labels such as 'comments feel more honest than brands', 'local pride is not enough', 'scripted endorsement', 'sustainable without proof', 'community involvement', 'relabelling suspicion', and 'boycott after deception'. Second, codes were grouped into second-order themes through constant comparison across YouTube comments and interviews. Third, the study developed aggregate dimensions that explain the digital-cultural verification process. Reflexive memos recorded coding decisions, deviant cases, and shifts in interpretation.

Trustworthiness was pursued through triangulation, an audit trail, and attention to negative cases. The netnographic corpus provided naturally occurring discourse. The extended interviews deepened the generational logic behind the discourse. The confirmatory interviews checked whether themes repeated across participant categories. Coding memos tracked why some videos, comments, and excerpts were excluded. This procedure follows qualitative trustworthiness principles that value transparency, credibility, dependability, and reflexive awareness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

Ethical decisions followed internet research principles that treat public availability as insufficient on its own to absolve researchers of responsibility (Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Franzke et al., 2020). Usernames, profile links, and other direct identifiers were removed from the analytical dataset. The manuscript uses anonymized YouTube quote codes and interview participant codes. Interview participants gave informed consent for the research use of anonymized excerpts.

Table 1 reports the full corpus audit trail and clarifies how the study moved from automated video discovery to a focused interpretive corpus. The table is central to the methodological argument because it shows that the analysis did not treat all collected comments as equally relevant; each layer moved through topical relevance screening, cleaning, and close coding.

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Table 1. Data corpus and analytical treatment

Data layer	Initial material	Screening or analytical treatment	Role in interpretation
YouTube search and video corpus	61 candidate videos; 30 videos selected by automated metadata and relevance filters; comments retrieved from 23 videos	Manual topical audit retained 17 videos directly related to brand authenticity, local branding, review credibility, cultural heritage, sustainability, or boycott discourse	Provided naturally occurring digital discourse and video-based context
YouTube comments	4,241 public comments	3,085 comments retained after video relevance audit; 2,562 comments remained after removal of short, emoji-only, promotional, and off-topic items; 524 theoretically rich excerpts received close coding	Main netnographic corpus
Extended digital elicitation interviews	18 Indonesian Gen Z participants aged 18-27	Participants interpreted anonymized YouTube stimuli and discussed authenticity, local culture, influencers, trust, advocacy, and backlash	Deepened generational interpretation and validated netnographic themes
Confirmatory interviews	14 shorter interviews with Indonesian Gen Z participants	Used to check repetition, clarify theme boundaries, and identify possible disconfirming cases	Supported saturation assessment and theme stability

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This staged treatment strengthens the credibility of the netnographic corpus. It separates broad platform noise from comments that directly address product quality, localness, creator credibility, sustainability claims, value-action consistency, and consumer response.

Table 2 presents the interview profile used to anchor the Gen Z interpretation. The table also explains why the interviews were not treated as a separate, stand-alone study, but as an elicitation layer that deepened the interpretation of YouTube discourse and addressed the age-verification limitation of public comments.

Table 2. Interview profile

Participant group	Extended interviews	Confirmatory interviews	Analytical rationale
Students	6	2	Represent intensive consumption of reviews, comments, and brand-related social media
Young professionals / fresh graduates	5	5	Represent Gen Z consumers with more independent purchasing routines
Active review-content users	4	4	Represent users who regularly rely on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, or comments before purchase
Moral issue or value-sensitive consumers	3	3	Represent consumers who had supported or rejected brands because of sustainability, boycott, local pride, or perceived inconsistency
Total	18	14	32 interviews used across interpretive and confirmatory stages

The distribution of participants provided the analysis with access to different consumption positions within Indonesian Gen Z: students with intensive exposure to review content, young professionals with more independent purchasing routines, active users of review content, and consumers who had already translated authenticity judgments into advocacy or rejection.

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Findings

Table 3 summarizes the coding structure. The table presents the movement from participant-centered and comment-centered observations toward broader theoretical dimensions.

Table 3. Gioia-inspired data structure

First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
Ordinary users feel less commercially biased; detailed negative comments slow purchase; repetitive praise raises suspicion	Peer comments as counter-promotional evidence	Platformed verification routines
Review videos help consumers inspect material, sizing, durability, price, and service; local pride does not compensate for weak quality	Product performance and price fairness as authenticity tests	Operational proof
Brand lokal can signal domestic pride but also relabelling; ODM/OEM debates become authenticity debates	Origin, sourcing, and domestic contribution scrutiny	Operational proof
Batik, regional identity, and local pride feel authentic when communities, artisans, or UMKM gain visibility and benefit	Reciprocal cultural participation	Cultural legitimacy
Influencers become trusted when they mention flaws; undisclosed sponsorship and flawless praise trigger skepticism	Candor as creator credibility	Credibility brokerage
Support, recommendation, and defense remain conditional; greenwashing, deception, and cultural extraction trigger withdrawal	Reversible trust and corrective eWOM	Conditional advocacy and backlash

Verification begins in the comment thread, not in the brand message

The first finding challenges a brand-centered view of authenticity. Participants did not begin by asking whether a brand looked authentic. They began by checking whether other users confirmed or disrupted the brand-facing message. YouTube comments operated as a counter-promotional evidence space. A claim that seemed convincing in a

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review video became provisional until users tested it and shared experience-based comments.

The comment corpus showed this routine repeatedly. Viewers used comment threads to question whether a local label hid imported production, whether a product delivered value for its price, whether a creator exaggerated performance, and whether a brand deserved support. One comment on local branding warned that the label "brand lokal" could mislead consumers when products were made in foreign factories and only received domestic labels (YQ00002). The point was not anti-local. It was anti-ambiguity. Localness had to be shown rather than assumed.

The interviews echoed this pattern. Participants repeatedly ranked ordinary user comments above official brand accounts because commenters appeared less tied to commercial incentives. A student participant said that brand accounts carried 'retorika komersial', while casual user comments felt more objective. A confirmatory interview made the same point more plainly: comments from ordinary users were more convincing because they described real-world experience rather than campaign language (HR_1). This pattern shows how eWOM influences authenticity judgments before purchase intention. Comments do not merely influence attitudes after consumers have formed them. They help build or block the attitude itself.

Operational proof outweighs symbolic attraction

The second finding clarifies the kind of evidence consumers valued. The strongest authenticity cues concerned performance, material quality, sourcing, service, durability, pricing, and honest limitation. YouTube review discourse trained viewers to inspect products in technical terms. Some comments praised videos that educated ordinary viewers about fashion materials, sizing, or product quality (YQ00026). Others challenged claims about laptops, skincare, shoes, or fashion brands by asking whether the price matched the quality of the materials and whether post-purchase support was available.

Interview participants treated operational proof as a higher-order authenticity test. They did not define authenticity as aesthetic originality alone. They connected it to claim-product consistency. A technology-oriented participant described authenticity as transparency about material origin, technical specification, and operational vision. A skincare and fashion user described authenticity as the willingness to acknowledge a product's limits rather than to promise perfect results. This logic shifts authenticity from a symbolic property to an operational relationship. A brand becomes authentic when its claims can survive use, comparison, and after-sales experience.

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This finding modifies classic authenticity measurement by showing how consumers translate quality commitment, credibility, and integrity into observable tests: material performance, publicly checked sourcing, service reliability, price fairness, and consistency between user experience and promoted claims.

Local pride works only after quality and contribution pass the test

The third finding complicates the role of local pride. YouTube comments contained many supportive statements about domestic brands. Viewers expressed pride when Indonesian products were shown to be capable, competitive, or internationally recognized. Some defended local technology brands, arguing that local capabilities should not be dismissed simply because components came from global supply chains. One comment stated that a laptop brand was not merely attaching a local name, as it had research capacity and contributions beyond simple relabelling (YQ00248).

Yet local pride did not function as a blank cheque. Participants insisted that quality remained the first threshold. They supported local brands when the product performed reasonably, communicated honestly, and contributed to domestic capability. They withdrew support when localness looked like inflated pricing, poor service, imported relabelling, or emotional nationalism without substance. The repeated interview phrase 'nilai lokal penting, tapi kualitas tetap nomor satu' captures this tension.

These finding challenges simplistic local-brand advocacy. Cultural closeness and domestic pride can open an affective pathway to support, but they cannot repair weak quality. Localness becomes authentic when it combines identity with contribution. It becomes suspect when it asks consumers to pay a moral premium without evidence.

Cultural symbolism needs reciprocal participation

The fourth finding specifies how cultural embeddedness works. Consumers did not reject the commercialization of culture by default. They rejected symbolic borrowing without reciprocity. YouTube comments on Batik Kanthil praised the way platform visibility helped a local cultural product become better known (YQ01850). Interview participants extended the point. They said batik motifs, regional stories, local language, or religious-cultural cues felt authentic when brands involved artisans, local producers, or communities as participants rather than decorative objects.

This distinction matters theoretically. Consumer Culture Theory explains that brands gain meaning from cultural systems (Holt, 2002), but the present data show that Gen Z consumers police the moral terms of that cultural use. Culture cannot function as

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a surface resource detached from benefit. When brands use regional identity, consumers ask who participates, who profits, and whether the story belongs to the brand's actual relationships. This moves cultural embeddedness from background context to evaluative mechanism.

The data also show that brands do not always need traditional symbols to appear authentic. Participants accepted that technology, skincare, or modern fashion brands can build authenticity through quality and service without resorting to cultural ornamentation. Nevertheless, when a brand chooses cultural symbolism, it accepts a higher burden of proof. Culture raises the stakes because consumers read it as a claim about belonging and responsibility.

Influencers become credible through usable imperfection

The fifth finding concerns creators and influencers. Participants did not treat influencers as inherently inauthentic. They valued reviewers who showed product use, compared alternatives, and named weaknesses. They distrusted creators who repeated slogans, hid sponsorships, overused perfectly polished visuals, or aggressively pushed purchase links. In short, credibility emerged through usable imperfection.

The confirmatory interviews made this logic clear. Participants repeatedly said a reviewer becomes believable when they mention both strengths and weaknesses (HR_2; FG_3; PR_1). Extended interviews gave sharper versions of the same reasoning. Participants looked for testing methods, disclosure of flaws, comparisons with competitors, and transparent sponsorship status. A positive review could still feel credible, but only when it did not erase limits.

Across the data, influencer credibility did not require neutral detachment. It required candor. Consumers tolerated creator preferences when they could see the basis for those preferences, but they resisted flawless enthusiasm because it looked like scripted discipline rather than user experience.

Authenticity failures trigger corrective eWOM and conditional backlash

The sixth finding explains how support can reverse. Participants described advocacy as conditional. They were willing to recommend, defend, and share brands when quality, local contribution, and transparent communication aligned. They also described sharp withdrawal when brands engaged in greenwashing, deception, exploitative labor practices, undisclosed sponsorship, or opportunistic cultural borrowing.

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This reversibility appeared in both data layers. YouTube discourse contained corrective comments that challenged claims, warned other consumers, or reframed local pride as possible relabelling. Interviews made the emotional threshold explicit. Several participants said they would stop buying from or support a boycott of a brand when its moral message conflicted with operational reality. One participant summarized the rupture as the collapse of legitimacy when ethical messaging and actual conduct diverged (MHS-02).

This finding extends research on brand activism and woke-washing by showing that Indonesian Gen Z consumers detect value-action gaps in local pride, cultural heritage, sustainability, influencer independence, and domestic contribution. Woke washing, therefore, appears as one member of a broader family of symbolic authenticity failures.

Digital-cultural verification as an integrated process

Taken together, the findings show that authenticity emerges through a sequence of verification. Consumers first encounter brand-facing cues: a review video, a creator statement, a local symbol, a sustainability claim, or a domestic pride narrative. They then move to comment-based scrutiny, where peer experience, correction, and comparison test the cue. Operational proof and creator credibility shape whether the cue becomes believable. Cultural legitimacy shapes whether local or moral symbolism becomes meaningful rather than extractive. The outcome remains conditional: consumers can support, recommend, and defend the brand, but they can also reject it through corrective eWOM, brand avoidance, or boycott talk.

Figure 1 presents the model. The model does not treat skepticism as a simple barrier to persuasion. It treats skepticism as an evidence-seeking routine. When evidence exists, skepticism can strengthen trust. When evidence fails, skepticism turns authenticity claims into proof of manipulation.

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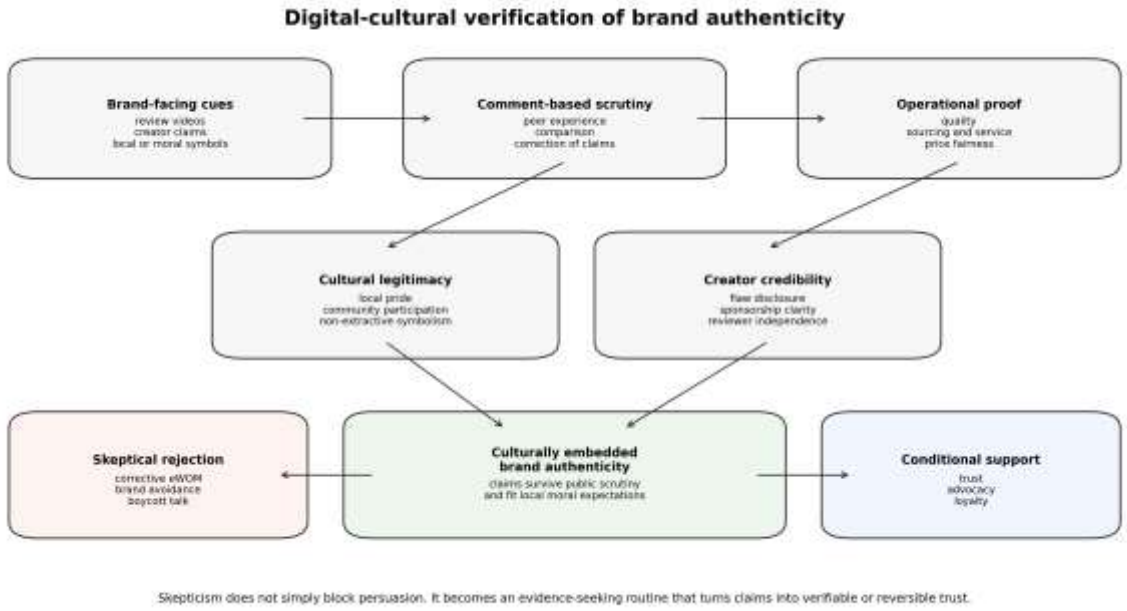


Figure 1. Digital-cultural verification model

Table 4 links the aggregate themes to representative evidence from the YouTube corpus and interview material. It functions as an evidentiary bridge between the Gioia-inspired structure in Table 3 and the theoretical interpretation developed in the Discussion.

Table 4. Representative evidence from YouTube comments and interviews

Theme	YouTube or interview evidence	Interpretive meaning
Peer verification	"Kata brand lokal juga agak sering dipakai buat agak menjebak… pabrikan China lalu cuma kasih label lokal aja" (YQ00002).	Consumers use comments to interrogate the gap between local branding and production reality.
Operational proof	"Banyak masyarakat awam jadi ngerti bahan dan kualitas fashion karena edukasi lo" (YQ00026).	Review discourse educates consumers on material quality and reduces dependence on brand claims.

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Domestic contribution	"Bukan berarti brand ini cuma tempel nama… bahkan Axioo udah punya tempat riset di 2 negara" (YQ00248).	Viewers debate localness as a matter of capability building, not only component origin.
Cultural legitimacy	"UMKM seperti Batik Kanthil bisa makin dikenal dan dicintai banyak orang" (YQ01850).	Cultural authenticity strengthens when brand visibility connects to local producers and heritage continuity.
Influencer skepticism	"Kalau hanya positif, saya curiga endorsement" (FG_3).	Flaw disclosure functions as a trust cue in influencer evaluation.
Conditional backlash	"Saya berhenti percaya kalau brand ketahuan greenwashing atau pencitraan" (HR_1).	Gen Z support can reverse when moral or sustainability claims lack evidence.

The excerpts in Table 4 show why digital-cultural verification operates as a process rather than a single consumer attitude. Consumers move across platform comments, creator cues, product evidence, local-cultural claims, and moral judgments before deciding whether to trust, support, correct, or reject a brand.

DISCUSSION

The findings update foundational brand authenticity theory by showing how classic dimensions become operationalized in platformed consumer discourse. Napoli et al. (2014) and Morhart et al. (2015) remain useful because they identify sincerity, continuity, credibility, integrity, symbolism, and a commitment to quality. Yet the current data show that Indonesian Gen Z consumers rarely name these dimensions in the abstract. They translate them into practical tests: whether a product performs as claimed, whether local production is genuine, whether a creator discloses weaknesses, whether sustainability claims are supported by evidence, and whether cultural symbols yield reciprocal value. This supports Eggers et al. (2022) but goes further by showing the micro-process by which authenticity is publicly verified.

Recent studies on sustainability and purpose branding help clarify the stakes of this process. Bulmer et al. (2024) show that sustainability messaging can support brand authenticity when platform communication is perceived as credible, while Sajid et al. (2024) show that greenwashing can lead to brand avoidance and negative word-of-

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mouth. Walter et al. (2024) and Caruelle (2025) demonstrate that woke washing and misaligned practice reduce credibility when consumers detect a gap between public values and corporate conduct. The present study extends this literature by showing that Indonesian consumers apply the same gap-detection logic to local pride, cultural symbolism, influencer reviews, and claims of domestic contribution. The authenticity failure is not limited to environmental or activist messaging; it also appears when cultural or national identity is reduced to promotional language without material proof.

The study also strengthens recent Gen Z research by showing how skepticism operates as a method, not just an attitude. Cammarota and Branca (2025) argue that Gen Z does not automatically demand brand activism; this cohort evaluates whether activism makes sense for the brand and whether it is backed by action. O'Sullivan et al. (2026) similarly frame Gen Z as attentive to transparency, accountability, and socio-political consistency. Our findings support this view but make it more granular. Indonesian Gen Z participants did not reject brands for being commercial. They rejected brands when commercial persuasion tried to hide behind flawless endorsements, vague sustainability claims, borrowed culture, or symbolic nationalism. That said, skepticism also strengthened trust when consumers found credible peer confirmation, transparent limitation, and operational evidence.

The Indonesian evidence in the recent literature is especially relevant here. Pratiwi et al. (2025) show that UGC and influencer communication among Indonesian Gen Z work through brand awareness, while Lim and Keni (2025) find that UGC and brand awareness carry more weight than influencer credibility in shaping purchase intention among young skincare consumers. Fitriani et al. (2025) demonstrate that influencer authenticity and brand authenticity remain significant for Gen Z purchase intention when involvement is considered. The present qualitative findings explain why these quantitative patterns occur. UGC and comments matter because consumers treat them as lower-interest evidence. Influencer authenticity matters only when creators provide usable imperfection: comparisons, limitations, disclosure, and visible product experience.

The findings also advance research on online review credibility. Darsana and Setiobudi (2025) show that perceived review credibility and review importance affect consumers' intentions to use online reviews when making Indonesian fashion purchases. This study adds a netnographic explanation: YouTube comments become credible when they sound specific, experiential, and collectively cross-checked. Generic praise does not have the same evidentiary value. A negative comment does not automatically destroy trust either. It becomes consequential when it names a concrete mismatch between claim

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and experience, such as relabelling, quality failure, hidden sponsorship, or unproven sustainability. This is why comment threads function as an authenticity infrastructure rather than a mere collection of opinions.

The cultural contribution lies in the distinction between cultural symbolism and cultural legitimacy. Consumer Culture Theory posits that brands carry cultural meanings (Holt, 2002), while global-local branding research shows that local iconness and global appeal interact in complex ways (Özsomer, 2012; Strizhakova & Colter, 2015). The present data refine the literature on Indonesian brand activism with recent evidence showing that consumer responses vary by age, region, and perceived sincerity (Ulza, 2025). In this study, cultural cues gained legitimacy when they involved local participation, domestic contributions, regional rootedness, or fair benefit-sharing. They lost legitimacy when consumers saw them as surface aesthetics. Localness, therefore, does not function as a simple positive moderator. It becomes a contested moral claim.

This mechanism widens the concept of washing. The literature has moved from greenwashing toward purpose-washing, woke washing, and performative allyship (Aisy et al., 2025; Xue & Mattila, 2024; Walter et al., 2024). Our findings add local-cultural washing and influencer washing. Local-cultural washing occurs when brands mobilize regional symbols, batik, local language, or domestic pride without reciprocal participation. Influencer washing occurs when brands use creator intimacy to simulate peer endorsement while suppressing critique or disclosure. These terms do not replace woke washing. They specify how value-action gaps appear inside culturally embedded digital markets.

The findings also deepen Attribution Theory in a digital marketplace. Kelley (1973) explains how people infer motives behind observed actions, but recent social media CSR research shows that audiences quickly and publicly evaluate contradictory information (Lewin & Warren, 2024). In our data, motive attribution was distributed across the brand, influencer, comment thread, and visible evidence. Consumers inferred sincerity not only from the brand's own message but from whether independent users repeated, corrected, or contradicted the claim. This distributed attribution process helps explain why brands cannot fully control authenticity through campaign design.

Finally, the findings refine the relationship between authenticity, trust, and advocacy. Brand Relationship Theory often positions trust as a mediator between authenticity and loyalty, while eWOM research links credibility to recommendations and online support. Recent work on brand activism, greenwashing, and socio-politically silent brands shows that trust can also reverse when consumers read inconsistency, silence,

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or moral opportunism as evidence against the brand (Sajid et al., 2024; Zaman Malik et al., 2025; Mahmud & Guzman, 2025). Our model captures this reversibility. Trust becomes advocacy when evidence holds across product, peer, creator, and culture. The same verification system produces corrective eWOM, avoidance, or boycott when evidence collapses.

Theoretical Contributions

The article makes four theoretical contributions. First, it reframes brand authenticity as digital-cultural verification: a process in which consumers move from brand-facing cues to peer scrutiny, operational proof, cultural legitimacy, creator credibility, and conditional behavioral response.

Second, the article positions YouTube comments as an authenticity infrastructure. eWOM research already recognizes comments as influential, but this study shows that comments work as a verification site where consumers collectively test localness, quality, price, sourcing, influencer independence, and moral claims.

Third, the article identifies cultural legitimacy as a distinct mechanism of authenticity in an emerging-market context. Cultural embeddedness does not merely moderate a universal process; it reshapes the content of authenticity by making community participation, domestic contribution, and non-extractive symbolism part of the evaluation.

Fourth, the article broadens purpose-washing theory by identifying local-cultural washing and influencer washing as related failures of authenticity. The same logic of value-action misalignment applies to several value-laden claims that matter in Indonesian Gen Z discourse.

Managerial Implications

For managers, the first implication is direct: authenticity cannot be outsourced to campaign language. Brands targeting Gen Z should treat YouTube comments, long-form reviews, and critical peer discourse as part of the brand environment. The comment thread can confirm claims, but it can also expose poor quality, inflated pricing, unclear sourcing, or scripted endorsement.

Second, local pride requires operational substance. Domestic branding can create emotional closeness, but it fails when consumers see only imported relabeling, poor quality, or symbolic nationalism. Brands should show where production, research, service, or community contribution happens. Localness needs evidence.

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Third, influencer strategy needs disciplined candor. A creator who discloses limits, compares alternatives, and acknowledges sponsorship can strengthen credibility. A creator who performs flawless enthusiasm may trigger suspicion. Brands should avoid over-controlling review scripts because overly polished endorsements weaken perceived independence.

Fourth, cultural campaigns require reciprocity. Brands using batik, regional identity, local language, or community narratives should show who participates and who benefits. Cultural symbols need a material relationship with people, place, and value distribution. Without that relationship, cultural branding risks becoming local-cultural washing.

Limitations and Future Research

The study has limitations. First, YouTube comments do not reveal the age of commenters. The article therefore treats the comment corpus as Gen Z-relevant consumer discourse and uses Gen Z interviews to support generational interpretation. Future research can combine platform comments with verified demographic panels or longitudinal digital diaries.

Second, the corpus focused on YouTube. This platform offers depth, but TikTok, Instagram, X, and marketplace reviews may produce different authenticity routines. TikTok may foreground virality and creator intimacy. X may foreground backlash and moral controversy. Marketplace reviews may foreground product performance. Comparative multi-platform research can test whether digital-cultural verification operates differently across platform architectures.

Third, the study focused on Indonesia. Future work can compare Indonesia with other emerging markets where local identity, religion, language, and community participation shape brand evaluation. Scholars can also develop measurement scales for digital-cultural verification, local-cultural washing, and creator candor as authenticity mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Indonesian Gen Z consumers do not passively receive brand authenticity. They verify it by comparing brand claims with peer comments, product performance, creator credibility, local contribution, cultural reciprocity, and operational evidence. YouTube comments operate as a public testing ground where brands gain or lose credibility through collective interpretation.

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The resulting model reframes authenticity as digital-cultural verification. Claims become credible when they survive platformed scrutiny and make sense within local moral and cultural expectations. Trust becomes advocacy when evidence holds, and backlash when value-action gaps appear.

Ethics Statement

The study analyzed publicly visible YouTube comments and voluntary online interviews. Direct digital identifiers were removed before analysis. Interview participants gave informed consent, and the manuscript uses anonymized participant codes and translated excerpts.

Appendix A. Interview Guide

The digital elicitation interviews used ten focused questions and three stimulus questions. Participants discussed digital review routines, the meaning of brand authenticity, signs of gimmick or symbolic branding, the use of local culture, influencer credibility, public comments, advocacy, backlash, and their interpretation of selected anonymized YouTube comments.

Table A1. Digital elicitation interview guide

Focus	Interview question
Digital verification	How do you use reviews and comments to decide whether a brand deserves trust?
Evidence	What do you look for in comments or reviews before believing a brand claim?
Authenticity	What does an authentic brand mean to you?
Gimmick or symbolic branding	What makes you think a brand only performs image-building, gimmick, or trend-following?
Cultural cues	When does the use of local culture, language, region, or community feel sincere rather than manipulative?
Local value	Does a local brand need cultural or community closeness to appear authentic?
Influencer credibility	How do you judge whether an influencer or reviewer speaks honestly?

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Public comments	When public comments disagree with a brand or influencer, which source do you trust more and why?
Advocacy	What makes you willing to recommend or defend a brand online?
Backlash	What makes you stop trusting, criticizing, boycotting, or avoiding a brand?
Stimulus 1	Which anonymized YouTube comment feels most convincing, and why?
Stimulus 2	Which comment makes you doubt the brand, and why?
Stimulus 3	Can comments like these change your brand evaluation? What part matters most?

Data Availability Statement

The anonymized analytical materials include YouTube comment excerpts, video metadata, coding notes, and digital elicitation transcripts. A de-identified coding matrix can be shared upon reasonable request, subject to ethical anonymization requirements and journal policy.

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