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The "Silent Boycott": How Generation Z Uses Algorithms to Resist Advertising

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Abstract: The "silent boycott" is an emerging form of algorithmic consumer resistance practiced by Generation Z on social media platforms. Our study aimed to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding this phenomenon. Our objectives were to identify the causal drivers of the "silent boycott", classify its methodological manifestations, explicate the underlying algorithmic mechanisms through which individual actions aggregate into systemic effects, and evaluate its implications for brands, platforms, and theoretical conceptualizations of consumer power. The study connected individual resistance tactics to platform-level distributional consequences and advertising auction dynamics, demonstrating that aggregated non-interaction behaviors generate measurable systemic effects. We employed an integrative theoretical methodology combining systematic literature review with cross-sectional data analysis from industry reports and empirical studies (2018–2025). Four primary drivers were identified: advertising overload, value gap between brand rhetoric and practice, declining trust in influencer marketing, and heightened algorithmic literacy. Four principal resistance methods were classified: zero engagement tactics, active use of platform feedback functions, strategic support for ethical content, and collective informal practices. We concluded that the "silent boycott" is a fundamental shift in consumer-platform power dynamics, necessitating strategic recalibration by brands and platforms. Individual non-interaction behaviors, when aggregated at scale, significantly alter algorithmic distribution patterns, reduce organic reach, and increase advertising costs while diminishing returns.

Keywords: Generation Z, "silent boycott", social media algorithms, advertising resistance, consumer activism, influencer marketing, algorithmic literacy, digital marketing

Citation: Khoretleva M. A. The "Silent Boycott": How Generation Z Uses Algorithms to Resist Advertising. *Virtual Communication and Social Networks*, 2026, 5(3): 358–370. <https://doi.org/10.21603/vcsn-2026-5-3-358-370>

Received 21 Apr 2026. Accepted after review 3 Jun 2026. Accepted for publication 8 Jun 2026.

обзорная статья

«Тихий бойкот»: как поколение Z использует алгоритмы для противодействия рекламе

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Аннотация: Цель – теоретически осмыслить феномен «тихий бойкот» как новую форму алгоритмического потребительского сопротивления, практикуемую поколением Z на платформах социальных медиа, и разработать интегративную модель, связывающую индивидуальные тактики сопротивления с системными эффектами на уровне платформ. Задачи: выявить причинно-следственные драйверы этого феномена, классифицировать его методические проявления, раскрыть лежащие в основе алгоритмические механизмы, а также оценить его последствия для брендов, платформ и теоретических концепций потребительской власти. Предложена комплексная теоретическая рамка, которая связывает индивидуальные тактики сопротивления с последствиями на уровне платформ и динамикой рекламных аукционов, демонстрируя, что совокупное неинтерактивное поведение порождает измеримые системные эффекты. Использована интегративная теоретическая методология, которая сочетает систематический

обзор литературы с анализом поперечных данных отраслевых отчетов и эмпирических исследований (2018–2025 гг.). Выявлены четыре основных драйвера: рекламная перегрузка, разрыв между риторикой бренда и реальной практикой, снижение доверия к инфлюенс-маркетингу (маркетингу влияния) и повышенная алгоритмическая грамотность. Классифицированы четыре основных метода сопротивления: тактика нулевого вовлечения, активное использование платформенных функций обратной связи, стратегическая поддержка этического контента и коллективные неформальные практики. «Тихий бойкот» знаменует собой фундаментальный сдвиг в динамике власти между потребителями и платформами и требует стратегической перестройки со стороны брендов и платформ. Индивидуальное неинтерактивное поведение, агрегированное в масштабе, существенно изменяет алгоритмические паттерны дистрибуции, снижает органический охват, увеличивает рекламные затраты и уменьшает отдачу от них.

Ключевые слова: поколение Z, «тихий бойкот», алгоритмы социальных сетей, сопротивление рекламе, потребительский активизм, маркетинг влиятельных лиц, алгоритмическая грамотность, цифровой маркетинг

Цитирование: Хоретлева М. А. «Тихий бойкот»: как поколение Z использует алгоритмы для противодействия рекламе. *Виртуальная коммуникация и социальные сети*. 2026. Т. 5. № 3. С. 358–370. (In Eng.) <https://doi.org/10.21603/vcsn-2026-5-3-358-370>

Поступила в редакцию 21.04.2026. Принята после рецензирования 03.06.2026. Принята в печать 08.06.2026.

Introduction

The proliferation of algorithmically curated social media environments has fundamentally altered the dynamics of consumer-brand interactions. In this study, we investigated the emergent phenomenon of a "silent boycott" – a distinctive form of consumer resistance employed by Generation Z that exploits the algorithmic architecture of social platforms to diminish advertising effectiveness. In particular, we aimed to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the "silent boycott" as a form of algorithmic consumer resistance. We also sought to explicate the mechanisms through which individual non-interaction behaviors aggregate into systemic effects on platform-level content distribution and advertising efficacy.

To achieve this aim, we pursued a number of objectives, namely to:

- 1) identify the primary causal drivers of "silent boycott" behavior among Generation Z consumers;
- 2) classify the methodological manifestations of advertising resistance into a coherent typology;
- 3) explicate the underlying algorithmic mechanisms through which aggregated individual actions produce systemic effects on content distribution, organic reach, and advertising auction dynamics; and
- 4) evaluate the implications of these effects for brand-level marketing effectiveness, platform-level

structural conflicts, and theoretical conceptualizations of consumer power in algorithmic environments.

One morning, 19-year-old Maria opens Instagram¹. Her feed shows a post from an influencer with 500,000 followers – a perfectly edited photo with coffee from a certain brand, the hashtag *#ad* barely visible at the end of a long text. Maria does not like it. She does not comment or save it. Instead, she clicks on the three dots in the corner of the post and selects *Not interested*. Then she selects *Hide ads from this advertiser*. The whole process takes three seconds. For the brand, this means not only the loss of one potential customer, but also a signal to the algorithm: this content is undesirable. Maria is not alone. Millions of Generation Zers (born between 1997 and 2012) do the same thing every day. They do not organize public campaigns, write angry posts, or call for boycotts. They just stay silent – and that silence is deafening.

This phenomenon, which we call a "silent boycott" or "silent resistance", is a new form of consumer activism. Unlike traditional boycotts, which require collective mobilization and public statements, the "silent boycott" is an individual, almost imperceptible action. Performed every day, its cumulative effect can be devastating for brands, as it directly influences how social media algorithms distribute content [Jin et al. 2025; Poleac, Gherguț-Babii 2024]. According to the Pew Research

¹ Meta Platforms, the parent company of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp Messenger, is banned in the Russian Federation as an extremist organization. Компания Meta Platforms, владеющая социальными сетями Facebook и Instagram и онлайн-мессенджером WhatsApp, признана экстремистской организацией, ее деятельность запрещена на территории РФ.

Center (2023), 95% of Generation Zers in the US use YouTube, 67% use TikTok, 62% use Instagram, and 59% use Snapchat². Social media is not just a channel of communication; it is the primary habitat for this generation [Nguyen, Duong 2024; Venes, Duarte 2025]. And this is where a new form of power is emerging: the power of non-interaction [Chung 2025].

Brands spend billions on influencer marketing. According to Influencer Marketing Hub (2024), the global influencer marketing market reached \$21.1 billion in 2023³. But what happens when the target audience systematically refuses to interact with this content [Jain 2024; Pradhan et al. 2022]? What happens when algorithms trained to maximize engagement begin to realize that commercial content generates avoidance rather than engagement [Liu 2025; Poleac, Gherguț-Babii 2024]?

Methods and Materials

For this study, we adopted an integrative theoretical methodology combining systematic literature review with secondary data analysis from cross-sectional industry reports and empirical studies. Our research framework was grounded in the intersection of consumer behavior theory, algorithmic studies, and digital activism scholarship. It drew upon the theoretical foundations on consumer resistance [Andersch et al. 2018], on algorithmic influence mechanisms [Poleac, Gherguț-Babii 2024], and on generational consumption patterns.

Our analytical approach involved four sequential stages. First, we conducted a systematic review of academic literature and industry reports published between 2018 and 2025 to identify primary causal factors contributing to advertising avoidance among Generation Z consumers. The sources included peer-reviewed journals, industry white papers from Adobe (2023), Deloitte (2023), Edelman (2023), Kantar (2023), and Pew Research Center (2023)⁴, as well as platform-specific analytics from Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.

Second, we classified the identified resistance behaviors into a typology of four principal methods based on their technical implementation and intended

algorithmic effect. Third, we performed a mechanistic analysis to trace how individual user actions aggregate into collective algorithmic outcomes, utilizing the framework of feedback loop dynamics in recommendation systems [Jin et al. 2025; Liu 2025]. Fourth, we evaluated the implications of these algorithmic effects at three levels: brand-level marketing effectiveness, platform-level structural conflicts, and theoretical conceptualizations of consumer power in algorithmic environments.

Data synthesis employed a comparative analytical method, cross-referencing quantitative metrics (engagement rates, ROI statistics, reach coefficients) with qualitative accounts of user behavior patterns derived from observational studies and platform usage reports. This multi-source approach ensures the triangulation of findings and strengthens the validity of the proposed theoretical model.

Results

Causes of the "Silent Boycott"

Advertising Overload: From Irritation to Active Avoidance

Generation Z grew up in an era of unprecedented advertising pressure. A study by Adobe (2023) found that the average social media user sees between 4,000 and 10,000 advertising messages every day. By comparison, in the 1970s, people saw around 500 advertising messages per day. This is not just a quantitative change – it is a qualitative shift in perception. Advertising has ceased to be background noise and has become an active distraction from the main purpose of using the platform – social interaction, entertainment, and self-expression [Garcia-Salirrosas 2020; Perić et al. 2020].

The phenomenon of users not noticing ad banners on websites used to be referred to as "banner blindness." Its modern version, however, is qualitatively different: users do not just ignore ads – they actively train algorithms to hide them [Alavi et al. 2024; Hossain 2018]. According to a Kantar study (2023), 69% of Gen Zers reported that they *actively try to avoid ads on social media*, compared to 45% of millennials and 28%

² Anderson M., Faverio M., Gottfried J. Teens, Social Media and Technology 2023. *Pew Research Center*. 11 Dec 2023. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2023/12/11/teens-social-media-and-technology-2023/> (accessed 15 Mar 2025).

³ Ibid.

⁴ 2023 Digital Trends. Experience Index. Adobe, 2023. URL: <https://www.adobe.com/content/dam/cct/creativecloud/business/teams/whitepapers/pdf/Adobe-Digital-Trends-2023.pdf>; 2023 Gen Z and Millennial Survey. Deloitte, 2023. URL: <https://www.fm-house.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/2023-Gen-Z-and-Millennial-Survey.pdf>; 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer. Navigating a Polarized World. *Edelman*. URL: <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2023/trust-barometer>; Webinar: Media Reactions 2023: Braving the battleground. *Kantar*. URL: <https://www.kantar.com/inspiration/advertising-media/webinar-media-reactions-2023-battling-the-battleground>; Anderson M... (accessed 15 Mar 2025).

of Gen Xers. Furthermore, 58% of Gen Zers reported using the *Hide ad* or *Not interested* features several times a day. Research confirms that advertising avoidance among Gen Zers is driven by perceived intrusiveness, cognitive overload, and a sense of loss of control over one's digital environment [Cao et al. 2023; Van Toan, Mai Anh 2024].

The Value Gap: When Brands Say One Thing and Do Another

Generation Z is often characterized as the most socially conscious generation. According to a Deloitte study (2023), 77% of Gen Zers believe that companies should actively contribute to solving social and environmental problems. Furthermore, 49% reported that they have stopped buying products from brands whose values do not align with their own [Djafarova, Foots 2022; Maulana et al. 2025]. However, the problem is not only that brands sometimes go beyond the values they actively promote when developing their policies. Generation Z is particularly sensitive to this issue and perceives it as hypocrisy [Balaskas et al. 2025; Kumari, Rani 2026].

The widespread phenomena of "greenwashing" (creating a false impression of environmental friendliness), "woke-washing" (exploiting social movements for marketing), and "purpose-washing" (declaring a mission without real action) demonstrate a trend toward deep mistrust [Bytof, Ritch 2023]. In 2023, the Chinese fast-fashion retailer Shein launched a large-scale campaign on TikTok involving a multitude of micro-influencers. Shein's strategy seemed flawless from a traditional influencer marketing perspective: the brand relied not on celebrities, but on an army of micro-influencers whose audience perceives them as "ordinary people". The goal was to create an illusion of organic, "grassroots" approval of the products through a massive stream of "haul" videos – unboxing videos of large orders. The campaign promoted a "sustainable collection".

Generation Zers, who are the most sensitive to environmental and ethical issues, saw an obvious contradiction in Shein's campaign [Vajkai Kovács, Zsóka 2020; Rossperiwi et al. 2025]. Their reaction was swift and harsh – but not in the form of public protests. Instead, they en masse used the *Not interested* feature on advertising posts, created ironic duet videos (without direct mentions of the brand so as not to increase its reach), and, most importantly, simply avoided interacting with the influencers' content. This collective but uncoordinated silence was noticed

by the TikTok algorithm. The platform, whose logic is based on predicting and maximizing engagement, received a clear signal: not only is this content uninteresting, but it is actively rejected by a key demographic group. As a result, despite millions of views (many of which were paid), the engagement rate was catastrophically low – less than 0.5% compared to the average 3–5% for fashion content on TikTok. The TikTok algorithm interpreted this as a signal of low content quality and began to reduce its organic reach [Jin et al. 2025; Kuswoyo et al. 2025].

This proves that in the era of algorithmic curation, the most powerful consumer tool is not expression, but conscious, strategic silence. The "silent boycott" proved to be more effective than any loud protest because it attacked not the brand's reputation in the media field, but directly its business model, which is based on algorithmic reach and conversion [Andersch et al. 2018; Nokhiz, Ruwanpathirana 2025].

The Crisis of Confidence in Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing was initially based on the idea of authenticity – the notion that influencers are "ordinary people" whose recommendations can be trusted more than traditional advertising. However, as influencer marketing became an industry, that authenticity began to disappear [Martowinangun, Komarudin 2025; Singer et al. 2023].

The decline in trust in influencers among Generation Zers has become a steady trend. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2023), in just four years (from 2019 to 2023), the level of trust in influencer recommendations among this audience had fallen from 63% to 38%. This 25% difference demonstrates not only skepticism, but also a fundamental crisis of perception: influencers are transforming from a source of personal recommendations into a tool for commercial communication [Peng 2023].

The crisis of trust in influencers developed gradually, fueled by three interrelated processes. The first was the blurring of the lines between personal opinion and commerce – when every third post is accompanied by *#ad* or *#gifted* tags, the audience naturally begins to perceive all of the creator's content as potentially paid for [Rodsevich 2025; Vuković, Pavković 2025]. Paradoxically, the platforms themselves contributed to this by giving rise to the *behind the scenes* genre: candid videos about mass PR mailings and conveyor belt content production destroyed the romanticized image of the influencer as an "ordinary person" [Bacha, Meghrajani 2025; Chen H. 2025;

Chen Z. 2025]. Finally, the situation was exacerbated by numerous scandals – from the promotion of dubious financial schemes to the advertising of unsafe cosmetics – which were actively discussed in the comments and gave rise to a wave of exposé content [Adesokan et al. 2024; Jamil 2025]. It is this triad of factors – total commercialization, the destruction of illusions, and systematic scandals – that has created the atmosphere of total skepticism that characterizes the modern perception of influencer marketing [Baghel 2023; Pradhan et al. 2022].

Awareness of Algorithmic Power

Generation Zers grew up with algorithms. They understand how recommendation systems work – at least intuitively. They know that their actions – likes, views, viewing time, comments – are data that train the algorithm. They know that if they like an ad, they will see more ads in their feed. If they click *Not interested*, they will see fewer [Poleac, Gherguț-Babii 2024; Jin et al. 2025]. And this knowledge turns into a strategy of resistance. If the algorithm learns from my behavior, I can train it to show me what I want to see and hide what I do not want to see [Chung 2025; Gunawan et al. 2024].

A study by the Mozilla Foundation (2023) called *YouTube Regrets* showed that 71% of Gen Z users actively use the *Unsubscribe* or *Not interested* features to curate their feed, compared to 34% of millennials⁵. This finding is consistent with broader research on algorithmic literacy, which demonstrates that users who understand how recommendation systems work are significantly more likely to engage in active feed curation [Ren, Jiang 2025].

Methods of Silent Resistance

Zero Engagement Tactic

The most basic but most common form of "silent boycott" is a complete lack of interaction with commercial content. In practice, this looks like a conscious refusal to engage in habitual actions: users stop liking posts marked *#ad*, refrain from commenting – even critically, since any reaction increases engagement metrics. They do not save posts to their bookmarks or repost them – even with ironic captions – and in Stories, they quickly scroll through advertising inserts, artificially reducing the viewing time, which the algorithm perceives as a clear negative signal [Alavi et al. 2024; Liu 2025].

This is effective because social platform algorithms are optimized for the engagement rate – the ratio of interactions to impressions. Content with low engagement receives less organic reach. If a large enough portion of the audience uses zero-interaction tactics, the engagement rate drops, and the algorithm begins to show that content to fewer people [Alam et al. 2025; Choi et al. 2025]. Post with an engagement rate below 1% on Instagram has 60% less organic reach than a post with an engagement rate of 3–5%.

Active Use of the "Not Interested" / "Hide Ad" Functions

A more active form of resistance involves the targeted use of built-in platform tools for direct dialogue with the algorithm. Unlike passive ignoring, users consciously click the *Not interested* buttons, hide ads marked *Not relevant* or *See too often*, disable displays from specific accounts, reject channel recommendations, and skip ads. The key point of these actions is not simply to clean up the personal feed, but to systematically train algorithms. Each such click informs the platform that this type of content is undesirable for an entire category of users⁶ [Chen H. 2025; Craig 2024].

Strategic Interaction: Supporting the "Right" Content

The flip side of the "silent boycott" is active support for content that aligns with the user's values. A clear behavioral pattern has emerged: mass ignoring of advertisements from large corporations is combined with active interaction with small and ethical brands [Scalvini 2023; Suttharattanagul et al. 2025]. Users willingly like and comment on honest reviews, even critical ones, and support influencers who demonstrate transparency in partnerships and take a conscious approach to collaborations [Abbas, Thahir 2025; Wright, Cherry 2023]. This creates a differentiated media environment where algorithms gradually learn to distinguish between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" commercial communication based on real audience interaction patterns [Poleac, Gherguț-Babii 2024; Van Toan, Mai Anh, 2024].

Collective Informal Practices

Although the "silent boycott" has no formal organization, Gen Z communities have informal norms for how to respond to commercial content. An analysis

⁵ YouTube Regrets: A crowdsourced investigation into YouTube's recommendation algorithm. Mozilla Foundation. URL: <https://www.mozillafoundation.org/en/youtube/findings/> (accessed 15 Mar 2025).

⁶ Anderson M...

of discussions on TikTok and Reddit revealed a kind of "unwritten code" of digital behavior: *Don't feed the algorithm* – a call not to interact with unwanted content, *Scroll fast, engage never* – a rule for obvious advertising, *Support small, ignore big* – an attitude toward conscious consumption. Particularly telling is the principle of *Call out, don't share out*, according to which dissatisfaction with a brand should be expressed in comments on neutral content or individual posts, avoiding interaction with the original advertisement. These behavioral patterns are transmitted through social learning – users adopt them by observing the actions of others, participating in discussions, and creating ironic memes that condemn advertising practices but do not increase their reach [Chen Z. 2025; Critikián et al. 2022; Scalvini 2023].

Mechanisms of Algorithmic Influence: How Silence Becomes Loud

Social Platform Algorithms: A Brief Overview

To understand the effectiveness of "silent boycott" tactics, we need to take a step back and understand the basic principles of how social platform algorithms work. Modern social platforms are not just passive channels for content. Their space is shaped by dynamic algorithmic systems, whose logic, despite its apparent complexity, is based on a few fundamental principles [Jin et al. 2025; Liu 2025; Poleac, Gherguț-Babii 2024].

The main principle is engagement prediction. The system constantly asks itself one key question: will a particular user want to interact with this post – like it, comment on it, share it? Based on our past behavior, it tries to predict our future reaction by creating a personalized probability map [Kuswoyo et al. 2025; Liu 2025]. This prediction is directly linked to relevance scoring. Each piece of content – a post, video, or story – is assigned a certain score. It is calculated based on a variety of factors, from text and tags to our past interactions and the behavior of people in our circle. Thus, the feed is not a chronological stream, but a constantly updated rating, where the top items are those that the system considers most relevant to you [Choi et al. 2025; Kuswoyo et al. 2025].

For any commercial platform, the key metric of success is the amount of time a user spends within the application. Algorithms are designed to maximize this metric, turning our attention into the main resource [Andersch et al. 2018; Nokhiz, Ruwanpathirana 2025]. Anything that can catch our eye and keep us from closing the tab is given priority. Finally, the most important aspect is the feedback loop. Algorithms are

not static; they learn in real time. Every action we take, from a long view to an instant scroll, becomes a valuable learning signal for them. The system adjusts its future predictions, creating a self-reproducing cycle: it shows us what it calculates we will respond to, and our response confirms or refutes its accuracy, forcing it to adjust its recommendations [Jin et al. 2025; Liu 2025].

Positive signals that the algorithm reads as a call to "show this to more people" include classic forms of interaction: likes, detailed comments, and reposts. However, more subtle indicators are just as important today: long video viewing times (which indicate sustained attention), saving a post, clicking on links, and even visiting the author's profile, which signals deep interest [Poleac, Gherguț-Babii 2024; Van Toan, Mai Anh, 2024].

On the other hand, there are negative signals that tell the system: "This content doesn't work, don't recommend it." These include active actions such as explicit rejection via the *Not interested* or *Hide* button, as well as premature exit from viewing the video. However, the most eloquent and powerful signal is often a passive lack of interaction. When content gets a lot of views but doesn't get any engagement, the algorithm makes a clear conclusion: the audience is indifferent to it [Alavi et al. 2024; Alam et al. 2025; Choi et al. 2025].

The Aggregation Effect: From Individual Action to Collective Trend

The pivotal force underlying the "silent boycott" phenomenon is one of scale. An individual user's act of selecting *Not interested* yields a minimal effect. However, when this action is replicated systematically by thousands of users, it coalesces into a perceptible pattern that social media algorithms are engineered to recognize [Chen Z. 2025; Van Toan, Mai Anh 2024].

This process can be illustrated through the lifecycle of an influencer's promotional post. Algorithmic distribution typically commences with an initial test phase, where the content is delivered to a core segment of the audience – often the most active 10% of followers. The engagement metrics within this cohort determine the post's subsequent trajectory. An engagement rate exceeding 5% signals platform algorithms to expand distribution to a broader audience segment, such as the next 20%. Conversely, an engagement rate below 2% results in the termination of organic reach amplification [Kuswoyo et al. 2025; Choi et al. 2025].

Thus, the strategic impact of the "silent boycott" materializes at this critical juncture. If a substantial portion of this primary, highly-engaged audience

segment collectively withholds interaction, the engagement rate during this decisive first phase becomes suppressed. Consequently, the algorithmic pathway to wider visibility is effectively deactivated, preventing the content from reaching a mass audience [Alam et al. 2025; Andersch et al. 2018].

This dynamic finds empirical support in recent industry data. A 2023 study by the platform Later.com revealed a pronounced decline in the average organic reach for Instagram posts tagged #ad, which fell from 23% of followers in 2019 to 11% in 2023⁷. The research identified a corresponding decrease in engagement rates as a principal contributing factor for this contraction in reach.

Personalized Filtering: The Algorithm's Learning Process

Modern algorithmic systems do not merely track aggregate engagement; they actively personalize content delivery for each user. When a user consistently demonstrates a specific pattern of behavior – such as ignoring posts tagged with #ad, selecting *Not interested* for promotional content, or quickly skipping advertisement-laden stories – the algorithm constructs a detailed preference profile [Alavi et al. 2024; Craig 2024]. This profile concludes the user lacks interest in commercial material. As a result, the system begins to systematically reduce the user's exposure to such content, even if that same content generates high engagement metrics among other audience segments [Jin et al. 2025; Liu 2025].

This leads to the formation of distinct "advertisement-free bubbles". These are specific audience segments that, through their patterned non-interaction, encounter significantly less commercial content than the general user population [Andersch et al. 2018; Nokhiz, Ruwanpathirana 2025].

Impact on Advertising Auctions: The Paradox of Rising Cost and Falling Efficacy

Most advertising inventory within social media ecosystems is transacted via real-time auction mechanisms, where advertisers compete for showcases. Crucially, the ultimate price of a showcase is not determined solely by the advertiser's bid, but also by the platform's forecasted engagement rate. This

relationship can be conceptualized through a simplified scoring formula:

$$Ad Rank = Bid \times Quality Score \times Predicted Engagement Rate.$$

Consequently, when a platform's algorithm anticipates a low probability of user interaction – based on historical data regarding a specific audience segment's response to similar commercial content – an advertiser targeting that audience is compelled to pay a premium to achieve a comparable level of reach [Jin et al. 2025; Poleac, Gherguț-Babii 2024]. This dynamic establishes a pernicious feedback loop for brands targeting Generation Z:

1) members of Generation Z systematically withhold engagement with commercial content [Alavi et al. 2024; Pradhan et al. 2022];

2) the platform's predicted engagement rate for this demographic declines [Jin et al. 2025; Kuswoyo et al. 2025];

3) the cost to reach this audience segment increases correspondingly [Bacha, Meghrajani 2025];

4) to compensate for diminished efficiency, brands escalate both their bid value and the frequency of ad exposures;

5) this amplification of advertising volume intensifies the perceived saturation within the user's feed [Alavi et al. 2024; Cao et al. 2023];

6) the resistance and avoidance behaviors of Generation Z are thereby reinforced [Pradhan et al. 2022; Van Toan, Mai Anh 2024].

The cycle returns to its origin, creating a self-perpetuating spiral of escalating cost and diminishing return.

Discussion

Implications for Digital Marketing

The Diminishing Returns for Influencer Marketing

Empirical data illustrates a clear trend of declining efficacy. According to Aspire's 2023 industry report, the average engagement rate for sponsored Instagram posts has declined from 3.5% in 2019 to 1.9% in 2023. Concurrently, a 2023 survey by HypeAuditor found that 67% of brands report a decreasing return on investment (ROI) for influencer campaigns specifically targeting Generation Z⁸. This is compounded by rising costs; Influencer Marketing Hub (2024) notes that the cost

⁷ 2023 Instagram Engagement Report. HubSpot; Mention, 2023. URL: https://biomedcast.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2023_Instagram_Engagement_Report_V2.pdf (accessed 15 Mar 2025).

⁸ The State of Influencer Marketing 2023. HypeAuditor. URL: <https://hypeauditor.com/resources/whitepapers/state-of-influencer-marketing-2023/> (accessed 15 Mar 2025).

of reaching Generation Z through influencers has increased by 40% over the past three years⁹. These trends are corroborated by independent academic research examining the declining effectiveness of influencer campaigns across multiple markets [Bijina 2025; Nadanyiova 2023; Savić et al. 2024].

The Erosion of Organic Reach

A brand's non-sponsored content is also susceptible to diminished visibility when the brand becomes associated with excessive commercialization [Garcia-Salirrosas 2020; Perić et al. 2020]. This decline is driven by the phenomenon of "brand fatigue", whereby users that grow weary of a brand's omnipresence begin to systematically disregard all content from that entity, extending beyond overt advertisements to include its organic posts [Prasanna, Priyanka 2024; Van Toan, Mai Anh 2024].

This behavioral shift is substantiated by survey data. A 2023 study by Sprout Social found that 54% of Generation Z respondents actively unfollowed brands specifically due to a perception of "too much promotional content".¹⁰ Furthermore, 48% of this demographic reported employing the Stop seeing content from this account function for brands they perceive as engaging in spam-like posting behavior [Chowdhury 2024; Prasanna, Priyanka 2024].

Forced Adaptation: Emerging Marketing Strategies

Confronted with this erosion of effectiveness, certain brands have begun to adapt their strategies in response. These adaptations are oriented toward rebuilding authenticity and trust, prioritizing audience value over direct promotional messaging [Baghel 2023; Nazara et al. 2025; Raj, Diksha 2025].

Key emerging strategies include:

1. Authentic Partnerships: moving away from high-volume, transactional campaigns toward establishing long-term partnerships with a select cohort of influencers who demonstrate a genuine, documented use of the product [Abbas, Thahir 2025; Rodsevich 2025].

2. Value-First Content: prioritizing content creation that provides inherent value – be it educational, entertaining, or inspirational – before introducing any sales-oriented messaging [Maulana et al. 2025; Peng 2023].

3. Radical Transparency: openly disclosing the commercial nature of content while simultaneously providing substantive reasoning for a product's merit, thus framing the promotion within a context of genuine advocacy [Shekhar 2024; Vuković, Pavković 2025].

4. Community Building: shifting focus from direct sales generation to the cultivation of dedicated brand communities, fostering a sense of belonging and peer-to-peer interaction [Critikián et al. 2022; Scalvini 2023].

A prominent example of this paradigm's success is the cosmetic brand Glossier. The company's marketing foundation was built upon leveraging user-generated content and authentic customer testimonials, rather than relying on traditional paid influencer arrangements. This strategy has yielded significant engagement, with the brand's engagement rate reported to be 300% above the industry average among Generation Z consumers [Baghel 2023; Wright, Cherry 2023].

Platform-Level Consequences

The fundamental business model of social media platforms is based on advertising revenue, yet the proliferation of commercial content actively degrades the user experience upon which the platforms' popularity depends. This dynamic creates a structural conflict of interests [Andersch et al. 2018; Goel, Madan 2025; Nokhiz, Ruwanpathirana 2025].

The goals of advertisers, users, and the platforms themselves are increasingly misaligned. Advertisers seek to maximize visibility, capture user attention, and drive conversions. Users primarily desire a reduction in advertising volume, more relevant and engaging organic content, and authentic interactions. The platforms are tasked with the contradictory objective of satisfying both parties – a balance that grows more difficult to maintain as user aversion to overt commercialization intensifies [Maheswari et al. 2025; Van Toan, Mai Anh 2024].

In response to this dilemma, platforms are actively experimenting with novel advertising formats designed to integrate commercial messaging more seamlessly, thereby making it less overtly "ad-like" [Aktaş, Şener 2019; Bacha, Meghrajani 2025]. Examples of this evolution include the following:

⁹ The State of Influencer Marketing 2024. *Influencer MarketingHub*. URL: <https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-benchmark-report-2024/> (accessed 15 Mar 2025).

¹⁰ The Sprout Social Index: 2023 State of Social Media Report. *Sprout Social*. URL: <https://shortyawards.com/16th/tbd-11> (accessed 15 Mar 2025).

1) on TikTok: features like "Spark Ads", which promote a brand's organic content, and "Branded Hashtag Challenges", which attempt to transform advertising into a participatory activity;

2) on Instagram: the development of "Collab posts" for co-created brand-influencer content and "Shopping tags" to embed commerce directly within the content stream;

3) on YouTube: the proliferation of "Shorts" with integrated product links and features like "Super Thanks", which shift monetization toward user donations rather than traditional ad interruptions.

A critical question persists, however: if users have developed sophisticated methods of resisting traditional advertising, will they not also learn to identify and circumvent these new, hybrid formats [Chen Z. 2025; Chung 2025]? Historical precedent demonstrates that the excessive commercialization of a social media platform can trigger a significant migration of its user base to emerging alternatives [Mina 2017; Šálková et al. 2023]. This pattern is observable in previous platform shifts, such as the movement of users from Facebook to Instagram, which coincided with perceptions of the former as becoming "overly corporate", and the subsequent migration from Instagram to TikTok, driven by sentiments that Instagram's content had grown "excessively polished and commercial".

Theoretical Implications: The "Silent Boycott" as a Form of Power

The established model of consumer activism was predicated on several demanding conditions. It required explicit collective mobilization, public declarations of intent, coordinated action, and often involved a tangible sacrifice – such as forgoing a product one might otherwise enjoy [Andersch et al. 2018; Güneş et al. 2022].

The contemporary practice of the "silent boycott" is a qualitatively distinct form of resistance that inverts these traditional requirements. It functions through individual action that achieves collective impact solely through algorithmic aggregation. It demands no public statement or formal coordination, though informal social norms can create a state of quasi-coordination. Most significantly, it imposes minimal personal cost, as the core action – simply withholding engagement – does not necessitate abandoning the platform itself [Chung 2025; Nokhiz, Ruwanpathirana 2025].

The conventional scholarly understanding frames platform algorithms as possessing unilateral power over users by actively shaping their content exposure and digital experience [Jin et al. 2025; Liu 2025]. The phenomenon of the "silent boycott," however, demonstrates that this power is bidirectional. Users, through their aggregated and systematic behavioral data, exert a distinct form of power over the algorithms. By withholding engagement, they fundamentally influence the very learning processes and assumptions upon which the algorithmic systems operate. This interaction establishes a dialectical power dynamic: algorithms shape user behavior, while users simultaneously train and calibrate the algorithms [Andersch et al. 2018; Kuswoyo et al. 2025; Nokhiz, Ruwanpathirana 2025].

The central question for contemporary digital studies thus shifts from identifying a unidirectional power source to analyzing who holds greater influence within this perpetual and recursive feedback loop [Craig 2024]. From a philosophical perspective, the "silent boycott" constitutes a form of performative silence. Within a digital context where constant engagement – liking, commenting, sharing – is not only anticipated but serves as a dominant social norm, the conscious refusal to interact becomes a significant and communicative act [Chen Z. 2025; Scalvini 2023]. This dynamic echoes the political concept of "non-participation" as a strategy of resistance. However, it has been strategically transposed into the domain of the attention economy, where passive disengagement directly undermines the fundamental metrics of value and influence [Andersch et al. 2018; Güneş et al. 2022; Nokhiz, Ruwanpathirana 2025].

Conclusions

This study set out to investigate the nature, causes, and consequences of the "silent boycott" as an emerging form of consumer resistance among Generation Zers. Our findings confirm the central hypothesis that Generation Z does not merely ignore advertising but actively employs algorithmic mechanisms to systematically reduce commercial content visibility. Our study demonstrates that the "silent boycott" phenomenon is qualitatively distinct from traditional consumer activism. It operates through individual action yet achieves collective impact through algorithmic aggregation.

Our key findings are as follows. Firstly, advertising saturation has reached a critical threshold, with the volume of promotional messaging exceeding

the cognitive processing capacity of the audience and provoking active, learned resistance rather than passive indifference. Secondly, the perceived gap between brand rhetoric and corporate action has eroded trust to the extent that authenticity has evolved from a desirable attribute to a prerequisite for commercial communication. Thirdly, algorithmic literacy has emerged as a substantive tool of consumer power, enabling users to behaviorally "hack" recommendation systems and transform passive consumption into active system manipulation. Finally, individual non-interaction behaviors, when aggregated at the population scale, generate measurable systemic effects on advertising efficacy, creating feedback loops that escalate costs while diminishing returns for advertisers.

The novelty of these findings lies in their systematic articulation of the mechanisms through which micro-level consumer behaviors translate into macro-level algorithmic outcomes. While prior research has documented declining engagement rates and growing advertising avoidance, this study provides a comprehensive theoretical framework that connects individual resistance tactics to platform-level distributional consequences, advertising auction dynamics, and structural conflicts within the social media ecosystem.

The practical significance of these findings is substantial. For brands, our study indicates that marketing strategies predicated on maximizing reach and frequency are becoming actively counterproductive. Future-oriented approaches must be built on demonstrated value, authentic alignment with consumer values, and respect for audience autonomy. The case of Glossier illustrates that user-generated content and authentic community engagement can achieve engagement rates 300% above the industry averages, providing a viable alternative to traditional influencer marketing.

For social media platforms, this study reveals an intensifying structural conflict between advertising revenue imperatives and user experience quality. Platforms that fail to navigate this equilibrium risk alienating their most valuable demographic segments. The documented migration patterns from MySpace to Facebook and subsequently to TikTok demonstrate that generational platform shifts can occur rapidly

when commercialization exceeds user tolerance thresholds.

Based on these findings, we propose the following recommendations. Brands should (1) shift from transactional influencer campaigns to long-term authentic partnerships; (2) prioritize value-first content that provides educational, entertainment, or inspirational merit prior to sales messaging; (3) implement radical transparency in advertising disclosures; and (4) invest in community-building initiatives that foster organic peer-to-peer engagement. Platforms should (1) refine algorithmic systems to better distinguish between welcomed and intrusive commercial content; (2) develop novel advertising formats that integrate commercial messaging into participatory rather than interruptive experiences; and (3) establish feedback mechanisms that genuinely incorporate user preferences into content curation decisions.

Future research should pursue several directions identified by this study. Longitudinal research tracking the evolution of "silent boycott" practices across different platforms and demographic contexts is essential to confirm the persistence of these trends. Experimental studies measuring the direct causal effects of specific resistance behaviors on algorithmic distribution would strengthen the mechanistic claims advanced in this analysis. Cross-cultural comparative research examining variations in "silent boycott" prevalence and methods across national contexts would illuminate the role of cultural factors in shaping algorithmic resistance. Finally, intervention studies testing the effectiveness of alternative marketing approaches – such as community-based brand building and value-first content strategies – would provide actionable evidence for practitioners seeking to adapt to this evolving consumer environment.

Conflict of interests: The author declared no potential conflict of interests regarding the research, authorship, and / or publication of this article.

Конфликт интересов: Автор заявил об отсутствии потенциальных конфликтов интересов в отношении исследования, авторства и / или публикации данной статьи.

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