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Emotional Bonding in Virtual Shopping Among Young Consumers: A Neo-five-senses Marketing Perspective

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Abstract

Virtual shopping is central to Gen Z consumption, yet online contexts limit traditional five-senses marketing by removing touch, smell, and taste. Building on neo-five-senses marketing (relaxation, authenticity, presence, social connection, ambiance), this article synthesizes recent scholarship and practice to explain how these experiential dimensions foster emotional bonding and loyalty among young consumers. We integrate evidence from sensory marketing, immersive technologies (AR/VR), and social commerce to show how usability and calm (relaxation), transparent value alignment (authenticity), novelty and exclusivity (presence), participatory communities (social connection), and coherent atmospheric design (ambiance) jointly humanize digital retail. We outline practical design levers, ethical cautions (e.g., authenticity fatigue, over-stimulation), accessibility constraints (technology gaps), and metrics for evaluation. The framework offers actionable guidance for brands seeking durable, value-consistent engagement with Gen Z in virtual commerce.

Keywords

Neo-Five-Senses Marketing; Gen Z; Virtual Shopping; Emotional Connection; Immersive Experience; Social Commerce

1. Introduction

Digital technologies have reshaped shopping into a virtual activity spanning websites, apps, social platforms, and immersive AR/VR contexts, with Generation Z—digital natives who view consumption as leisure and identity expression—at the center of this transformation (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Traditional five-senses marketing is constrained online because only sight and sound can be reliably delivered, leaving touch, smell, and taste absent and creating a "sensory gap" that challenges brands to evoke emotional responses (Krishna, 2012). To address this, Zhu (2024) introduced neo-five-senses marketing, which reframes engagement around five experiential dimensions—relaxation, authenticity, presence, social connection, and ambiance—treated as psychological "senses" that compensate for missing physical cues. This study therefore asks how each dimension can be designed in virtual shopping to strengthen young consumers' emotional connection and loyalty, a question that matters both theoretically and managerially given established links between attachment, trust, and repeat behavior (Iglesias et al., 2011; Dwivedi et al., 2019). Building on prior scholarship and practice, we articulate the mechanisms and design levers of each dimension and present a conceptual framework that organizes literature, highlights managerial implications, and points to future research directions.

2. Literature Review

Sensory marketing has long been recognized as a critical approach for creating meaningful consumer–brand relationships by stimulating multiple senses to evoke emotions and memories (Krishna, 2012). In traditional retail contexts, sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste are integrated to deliver immersive experiences that strengthen consumer attachment. However, in online and virtual shopping, much of this multisensory richness is lost, as consumers can typically rely only on visual and auditory cues (Platon, 2021). This sensory limitation constrains emotional engagement, yet digital technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) have begun to compensate by enhancing immersion, telepresence, and interactivity (Chen et al., 2024; Surugiu et al., 2025). At the same time, scholars increasingly argue that emotional and social stimuli—such as interactive narratives, personalization, and community participation—can substitute for missing sensory channels. It is on this basis that Zhu (2024) introduced the concept of the "neo-five-senses," shifting the focus from physical senses to five experiential dimensions—relaxation, authenticity, presence, social connection, and ambiance—as central to understanding consumer emotions in virtual shopping.

This shift is particularly relevant when considering Generation Z, the first cohort of digital natives whose consumption behaviors are deeply embedded in online environments. Numerous studies highlight that Gen Z values authenticity, transparency, and cultural resonance, rewarding brands that align with their identities and rejecting those they perceive as insincere (Theocharis et al., 2025). Their trust is reinforced by user-generated content, peer recommendations, and transparent communication, while personalization further enhances perceived authenticity by signaling that the brand recognizes individual needs (Singh & Kaunert, 2024). Gen Z also exhibits a strong preference for interactive and socially connected shopping experiences, often influenced by social networks, influencer endorsements, and user communities (Ou et al., 2025). Reports suggest that nearly 60% of Gen Z respondents consider AR-based try-ons and gamified shopping more personal and engaging (Riar et al., 2022), underscoring their demand for novelty and technological innovation. Moreover, the prevalence of the "fear of missing out" (FOMO) makes exclusivity-driven strategies—such as limited-time events, early access campaigns, or virtual product drops—especially effective in eliciting both excitement and loyalty (Theocharis et al., 2025). Collectively, these traits indicate that Gen Z consumers are particularly receptive to approaches that emphasize emotional connection and experiential richness.

The neo-five-senses marketing framework thus provides a timely theoretical extension of experiential marketing (Schmitt, 1999) and emotional branding. Relaxation addresses young consumers' desire for relief and comfort in high-pressure lifestyles, while authenticity emphasizes the role of cultural rootedness, transparency, and value alignment. Presence captures both the immersive quality of virtual environments and the salience of brand identity through innovation and exclusivity, whereas social connection reflects the increasing integration of e-commerce and social platforms in cultivating belonging and trust. Finally, ambiance highlights the design of immersive atmospheres in virtual spaces, where thematic richness and dynamic interactions stimulate exploration, enjoyment, and loyalty (Obeid & Demirkan, 2020). Taken together, these five dimensions not only reframe sensory marketing for digital commerce but also offer a comprehensive lens through which to analyze the emotional bonds that young consumers form with brands in virtual shopping environments.

3. Research Findings

Our analysis based on the neo-five-senses framework shows how relaxation, authenticity, presence, social connection, and ambiance jointly shape young consumers' emotional engagement in virtual shopping. Relaxation positions shopping as leisure through intuitive navigation, minimalist design, and calming elements that reduce stress (Shravani et al., 2021). Authenticity stems from transparent storytelling and value-driven practices, fostering trust and cultural resonance, while inconsistency quickly undermines bonds. Presence arises from novelty and exclusivity—AR try-ons, VR launches, and limited drops—which heighten salience and FOMO (Chen et al., 2024). Social connection turns shopping into a communal activity through UGC, reviews, and live-streams (Ou et al., 2025), deepening loyalty by embedding choices in peer validation. Ambiance synthesizes the other dimensions by providing thematic atmospheres that immerse consumers and reinforce brand identity (Obeid & Demirkan, 2020). Collectively, the five senses function interactively: relaxation builds comfort, authenticity builds trust, presence builds excitement, social connection builds belonging, and ambiance integrates them into a memorable whole.

As Table 1 shows, the neo-five-senses operate through distinct yet complementary mechanisms that together humanize virtual shopping. This interplay confirms the framework's utility for understanding how Gen Z evaluates and emotionally engages with digital retail experiences.

Table 1. Findings on Neo-Five-Senses Marketing Dimensions

Dimension	Mechanism	Practices (Examples)	Emotional Effect on Gen Z
Relaxation	Stress relief, ease of use	Minimalist design, VR browsing, calming media	Comfort, reduced anxiety
Authenticity	Value alignment, cultural fit	Transparent storytelling, sustainability cues	Trust, identity resonance
Presence	Innovation & exclusivity	AR try-ons, VR launches, limited drops	Excitement, trend participation
Social Connection	Community & interaction	UGC, live-streams, multiplayer shopping	Belonging, peer validation
Ambiance	Immersive atmospherics	Thematic VR scenes, dynamic environments	Immersion, memorable experiences

4. Discussion

The findings show that neo-five-senses marketing provides a comprehensive framework for engaging Gen Z in virtual shopping by integrating relaxation, authenticity, presence, social connection, and ambiance into a holistic experience. Each dimension reinforces the others—ambiance can heighten relaxation or excitement, social features make authenticity more credible, and exclusivity fuels social buzz—so effective strategies must layer multiple senses rather than treat them in isolation. Yet the approach also entails cautions: over-stimulation may lead to fatigue, exaggerated claims risk "authenticity fatigue," and excessive comfort could encourage impulsive buying, highlighting the need for ethical balance. Practical barriers remain, since not all firms can afford advanced AR/VR or sustain active communities, and accessibility gaps may exclude less tech-equipped users. Moreover, emotional engagement must translate into durable loyalty rather than short-lived novelty, requiring ongoing innovation and cultural alignment. Despite these challenges, evidence suggests that when implemented thoughtfully—with inclusivity, transparency, and privacy safeguards—the framework can enhance consumer well-being and generate tangible business benefits such as higher conversion rates, stronger loyalty, and richer feedback. Ultimately, neo-five-senses marketing shifts online shopping from a functional act to a relationship-oriented experience, offering brands a pathway to humanize digital commerce and build lasting consumer bonds.

5. Conclusion

This study expands the neo-five-senses marketing framework—relaxation, authenticity, presence, social connection, and ambiance—as critical dimensions for forging emotional bonds between young consumers and brands in virtual shopping. By reframing online shopping as an experiential and relational activity rather than a purely transactional one, the framework explains why traditional digital retail often feels lacking and prescribes how immersive, authentic, and community-oriented strategies can humanize virtual commerce. Brands that master these dimensions can reduce stress, foster trust, create excitement, build belonging, and design memorable atmospheres, thereby enhancing loyalty, advocacy, and measurable outcomes such as higher conversions and lower return rates. Looking ahead, technological advances like AR/VR, haptics, and even digital scent may enrich these experiences further, but the guiding principle must remain a balanced, ethical focus on consumer well-being. In doing so, neo-five-senses marketing offers both a diagnostic lens for understanding Gen Z engagement and a prescriptive path for brands to cultivate enduring, value-consistent relationships in the evolving digital marketplace.

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