

EXPLORING EMOTIONAL CUES IN THE PURCHASE DECISIONS OF GEN Z AND MILLENNIALS IN CHENNAI

¹Ms. R. Iswarya, ² S. Dharshini

¹Assistant professor & ² II Year UG Student, Shrimathi Devkunvar Nanalal Bhatt Vaishnav College
for Women.

MOBILE NO : ¹ 8939794576 & ² 9445983686

EMAIL ID : ¹ ishuraghu96@gmail.com & ² . dharshinisankaran09@gmail.com

Abstract

The present study investigates the influence of emotional micro-triggers (subtle emotional indicators) on the purchasing behaviours of Gen Z and Millennial shoppers in Chennai City. Micro-triggers may be identified by various visual cues including color, brief persuasive messaging, nostalgia-inducing cues, personalized recommendations/suggestions, and social proof signals. All of these cues have the potential to influence the ways in which individuals perceive/feel and act when making purchases. In today's digital world, where online shopping and mobile applications are an integral part of our daily lives, understanding these emotional micro-triggers has become increasingly important for brands wishing to establish connections with younger consumer markets. A mixed-method research design was utilized to collect quantitative data via structured questionnaires completed by 181 participants, and qualitative data through follow-up interviews. The findings indicated that Gen Z was highly influenced by visually appealing design features, immediate rewards/incentives, and cues provided by influencers; whereas Millennials were influenced primarily by trust, emotional storytelling/marketing, and messaging emphasizing the practical and/purposeful nature of products/services. However, both generations demonstrated strong reactions to personalized prompts/recommendations and contextually relevant interactions throughout the shopping process. Overall, this study illustrates the significance of using emotional design and micro-triggers to positively impact consumer buying behavior. These findings provide practical implications for marketers, UX designers/researchers, and retailers interested in developing engaging, relatable, and ultimately successful shopping experiences for younger consumer segments.

Keywords:

Emotional cues, Gen Z, Millennials, Purchase decisions, Consumer behaviour, Chennai City

Introduction

The study examines how small emotional prompts — or "emotional micro-triggers" — affect the purchasing habits of Gen Z and Millennial consumers within Chennai City. Examples of micro-triggers are color, brief persuasive messaging, nostalgic reminders, customized recommendations, and social proof that subtly affects what one thinks and feels when making purchases. Since on-line shopping and mobile applications are now a part of daily existence, knowing these cues will continue to be essential to companies who wish to engage with younger consumer segments. The study utilized a two-part methodology. First, it collected quantitative data using a questionnaire administered to 181 participants. Next, the study conducted qualitative interviews to obtain more detailed information regarding the participants' emotional responses. Results indicated that Gen Z was most affected by appealing visual designs, immediate rewards, and endorsements from influencers. On the other hand, Millennials responded positively to messages that demonstrated trustworthiness, told stories with an emotional component, and illustrated how a product/service could benefit them in a practical manner. However, both generations responded positively to real-time promotional prompts and context-based interactions throughout their shopping experience. Overall, the study demonstrates that emotional design and subtle cues can significantly impact consumer buying behavior. The findings provide useful guidance to marketers, user interface designers, and retailers who wish to develop more engaging, relatable, and successful shopping experiences for young consumers.

Review of Literature

1. Gen Z E-Commerce Behaviour (Krishna & Sharma, 2024)

Recent research by Krishna and Sharma (2024) highlights how Gen Z consumers have emerged as one of the most influential groups shaping the future of e-commerce. Their bibliometric analysis shows that Gen Z's online behaviour is driven by constant exposure to digital media, rapid decision-making styles, and a preference for highly interactive shopping experiences. The study reveals that this generation places strong emphasis on convenience, instant gratification, and visually rich interfaces. Trends such as live interactions, influencer-driven promotions, and mobile-first shopping dominate their purchase patterns. This research provides a foundation for understanding how emotional micro-triggers, such as visual cues

and engaging platform features, align with Gen Z's digital expectations.

2. Emotional Influences in Online Consumer Behaviour (Ngo et al., 2024)

In addition, Ngo et al. (2024) state that emotional aspects are an important component in how we shop online. As stated in their study, external stimuli including aesthetic quality of a website; ease of use; messaging intended to persuade customers; and advertising/promotion cues have a major impact on how consumers feel about their shopping experience and ultimately result in unplanned purchases. The authors of this study found that consumers tend to respond emotionally to products or services prior to processing information about them logically, particularly when purchasing online in a time-sensitive environment. Therefore, it has been demonstrated through this study that emotional micro-triggers—visual and/or contextual cues that may be unnoticeable at first—can draw a customer's attention, generate excitement, and accelerate the decision-making process.

3. Live-Streaming Social Commerce & Gen Z (Mardhiana, 2024)

Mardiana (2024) studied Gen Z's impulsive buying behavior in live-streaming social commerce platforms. She found that emotional triggers were operating at the moment. Her research showed that parasocial interactions (feelings of closeness or trust with hosts/influencers) had an impact on purchase decision-making. Emotional motivations, excitement, and a sense of social connectedness also encouraged immediate purchases. Live chat features, product demonstrations, and host endorsements served as emotional micro-triggers which increased urgency and enhanced product appeal. The results of her study provide strong evidence that Gen Z is particularly vulnerable to emotionally charged shopping environments, especially those which replicate digital versions of social/interpersonal experiences.

4. Generational Differences in Online Shopping (2024–25 Study)

A comparative study (2024–2025) of the online purchasing behaviors of Millennials and Gen Z revealed several significant behavioral differences between these two generations in terms of their responses to digital shopping. The results of the study indicate that members of Gen Z react positively to digital marketing features including gamified shopping experiences, time-sensitive promotions, and endorsements by social media influencers. In contrast, Millennials

prefer to have access to comprehensive product information, credible brands, and functional advantages prior to purchasing. Therefore, it is evident that a different set of emotional micro-triggers will need to be developed for each generation.

5. Emotional Shifts & Trust Building in Gen Z (Wangsa, 2025)

Wangsa (2025) examines the way emotional changes impact Gen Z's online purchasing experience and what role trust building devices play. The study demonstrates that as Gen Z browses on-line, they go through many different emotional states due to interface design, social interaction, and brand communication. Trust becomes an extremely important component of their online shopping decision making process, particularly in relation to brands/products that are new to them. Providing clear information, being transparent and authentic provides stability for Gen Z's emotions and increases their confidence in making a purchase. The study also demonstrates that emotional micro-triggers – i.e., positive visual designs, credible influencers and transparent policies – directly contribute to building trust which in turn influences Gen Z's purchasing decisions.

Research Objectives Objective 1

To identify the main emotional micro-triggers that influence the shopping decisions of Gen Z and Millennial consumers in Chennai, using factor analysis to group these triggers into meaningful categories.

Objective 2

To explore whether how demographic factor educational level shapes the purchase decision of consumers, using Chi-Square tests to examine the association between the variables.

Objective 3

To examine whether Gen Z and Millennials differ in the types of emotional micro-triggers they respond to, and to determine if these generational differences are statistically significant.

Objective 4

To analyse the association between generational cohorts (Gen Z and Millennials) and the social media platform that most influences their online purchase decisions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a **descriptive and analytical research design**, enabling the researcher to identify, analyse, and interpret the emotional micro-triggers influencing the purchase decisions of young consumers. A **purely quantitative approach** is employed, using a structured questionnaire to collect measurable and comparable data. The population for the study comprises **Gen Z and Millennial shoppers residing in Chennai City** who engage in online purchasing with a sample size of **181 respondents**. The sample was selected using **convenience sampling**, allowing easy access to participants within the target demographic.

Data Collection

- **Primary Data:** Collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of Likert-scale items and categorical questions.
- **Secondary Data:** Sourced from journals, books, research articles.

Statistical Tools Used

- **Objective 1:** Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Cronbach's Alpha for identifying key emotional micro-trigger factors and assessing scale reliability.
- **Objective 2:** Chi-Square Test to examine the association between **educational level** and **purchase decision**.
- **Objective 3:** Chi-Square Test to compare **Gen Z and Millennials** based on preferred emotional micro-triggers.
- **Objective 4:** Chi-Square Test to determine the association between **generation** and the **social media platform that most influences online purchase decisions**.
- **Descriptive Statistics:** Mean, standard deviation, frequencies, and percentages to summarize and interpret the data.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTREPRETATION

PERCENTAGE ANALYSIS

- **Table 1: Demographic and socio economic details of the respondents**

		Frequency	%
Age	Below 18 years	16	8.8
	18-22 years	26	14.4
	23-28 years	57	31.5
	29-35 years	55	30.4
	Above 35 years	27	14.9
Gender	Male	66	36.5
	Female	115	63.5
Generation	Gen z	99	54.7
	Millennial	82	45.3
Education Level	School Level	13	7.2
	Undergraduate	80	44.2
	Postgraduate	49	27.1
	Professional Qualification	39	21.5
Occupation	Student	18	9.9
	Private Employee	102	56.4
	Government Employee	20	41.6
	Business	24	58.3
	Home maker	13	7.2
Monthly Family Income	Below ₹15000	5	2.8
	₹15001-₹30000	1	.6
	₹30001-₹50000	71	39.2
	Above ₹50,000	104	57.5
Area of Residence	North	50	27.6
	Central	35	19.3
	South	70	38.7
	Suburban	26	14.4
Preferred mode of shopping	Mostly online	94	51.9
	Mostly offline	24	13.3
	Both equally	63	34.8

The demographic profile demonstrates that the respondent group is predominantly composed

of young adults, with the majority falling within the 23–35 year age bracket. Females constitute a larger share of the sample, and most participants align with the Gen Z and Millennial generations. Educationally, the sample is well qualified, as a significant proportion of respondents hold undergraduate or postgraduate degrees.

Occupational data reveal that the private sector represents the primary source of employment for respondents, followed by those engaged in business and government services. A substantial portion of the sample reports a monthly family income exceeding ₹50,000, indicating relatively strong socio-economic standing. Regionally, most respondents reside in the Southern and Northern parts of the country, with a notable subset living in suburban areas. Shopping behaviour patterns indicate a marked preference for online purchasing, although a considerable number demonstrate a balanced use of both online and offline modes.

RELIABILITY ANALYSIS

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.888	21

The scale shows strong reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.888 across 21 items, indicating high internal consistency and dependable measurement.

CHI-SQUARE TEST

Relationship between the educational level and purchase decision (Impulse behaviour)

HO: There is no significant relationship between the educational level and purchase decision

H1: There is significant relationship between the educational level and purchase decision

Table: 3

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	16.342 ^a	3	.001
Likelihood Ratio	13.140	3	.004
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.982	1	.005
N of Valid Cases	181		

INTERPRETATION:

Since the asymptotic value (.001) is less than the significant value (0.05), so we reject the null hypothesis (H₀). Therefore, there is a significant relationship between the educational level and purchase decision

Relationship between the generational cohorts and emotional micro triggers (Nostalgia theme & ad)

H₀: There is no significant relationship between the generational cohorts and emotional micro triggers (Nostalgia theme & ad)

H₁: There is significant relationship between the generational cohorts and emotional micro triggers (Nostalgia theme & ad)

Table: 4

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.339 ^a	2	.069
Likelihood Ratio	6.852	2	.033
Linear-by-Linear Association	.302	1	.582
N of Valid Cases	181		

INTERPRETATION:

Since the asymptotic value (.069) is greater than the significant value (0.05), so we accept the null hypothesis (H₀). Therefore, there is no significant relationship between the generational cohorts and emotional micro triggers (Nostalgia theme & ad)

Relationship between the gender cohorts and social media platform influences the most

H₀: There is no significant relationship between the generational cohorts and social media

platform influences the most

H1: There is significant relationship between the generational cohorts and social media platform influences the most

Table: 5

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.949 ^a	4	.007
Likelihood Ratio	14.178	4	.007
Linear-by-Linear Association	10.485	1	.001
N of Valid Cases	181		

INTERPRETATION:

Since the asymptotic value (.007) is less than the significant value (0.05), so we reject the null hypothesis (H0). Therefore, there is a significant relationship between the generational cohorts and social media platform influences the most.

FACTOR ANALYSIS

Table 4: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.848
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	7310.126
	df	210
	Sig	0.000

Rotated Component Matrix				
	1	2	3	4
Cashback	0.802			
Inspiring brand	0.756			
Nostalgia	0.643			

Flash sale	0.642			
Only Few left	0.631			
Social Media post	0.620			
Personalised Notification		0.857		
Personalised offer		0.773		
Storytelling ad		0.648		
Rating		0.582		
Updated with trends		0.563		
Bestseller		0.532		
Secure payment		0.512		
Clean layout			0.867	
Attractive colour			0.801	
Product Image			0.675	
Clear return				0.836
Transparency				0.595
Others buy				0.580
Influencer's recommendation				0.564
Recommended for you				0.530
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.				
a. Rotation converged in 8 iterations.				

INTERPRETATION

The suitability of the dataset for factor analysis was first examined using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The KMO value of 0.848 indicates strong sampling adequacy, suggesting that the patterns of correlations in the data are appropriate for identifying meaningful factors. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was also highly significant ($\chi^2 = 7310.126$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that the correlations among variables are sufficiently large to justify the use of Principal Component Analysis (PCA).

Using PCA with Varimax rotation, four components with eigenvalues greater than 1 were

extracted. Together, these factors explained over 98% of the total variance, demonstrating that the factor solution captures nearly all the underlying information in the dataset. The rotation helped produce a clearer and more interpretable structure.

FACTOR 1 reflects **Promotional and Emotional Influence**. This factor includes variables such as cashback, inspiring brand messages, nostalgia, flash sales, scarcity cues, and social media posts. These elements represent how promotional activities and emotional triggers shape consumer responses.

FACTOR 2 represents **Personalisation and Trust**. It includes personalised notifications and offers, storytelling advertisements, product ratings, trend updates, secure payment options, and bestseller indicators. This factor shows the importance of personalised communication and trust-building elements in guiding consumer decisions.

FACTOR 3 captures **Visual Product Presentation**. Clean layout, attractive colours, and product images load strongly on this factor, indicating that the visual appeal of a product or platform plays a major role in consumer engagement.

FACTOR 4 highlights **Social Proof and Transparency**. This includes clear return policies, overall transparency, influencer recommendations, what others are buying, and personalised recommendations. This factor underscores the value of clarity, trust, and social guidance in influencing purchase decisions.

In summary, the PCA findings reveal that consumer behaviour in this context is shaped by four major dimensions: promotional and emotional appeal, personalisation and trust, visual presentation, and social proof. Together, these factors provide a strong foundation for understanding what drives consumers and offer practical insights that can support more effective marketing strategies.

FINDINGS

The research findings demonstrate a significant impact of emotional micro-triggers on the online purchase behavior of young customers in Chennai, specifically within the Gen Z and Millennial demographic. It was determined that Gen Z tends to respond positively to visual appeal (layout design), bright colors, flash sales, immediate rewards, and endorsements/influencers; these preferences reflect a desire for quick, visually stimulating,

and socially validated content. Conversely, Millennials tend to be more influenced by factors that build trust including well defined return policies, security indicators for payments, credible customer reviews and advertising strategies that tell stories and focus on practical aspects and emotional depth. Additionally, education levels significantly influenced how consumers made purchasing decisions, with those who had higher education levels exhibiting deliberate and emotionally aware decision-making processes. Interestingly, nostalgia-themed advertising showed no discernible differences in terms of generational response, therefore indicating that nostalgia-themed advertising appeals to all generations equally. Additionally, social media platforms influenced each generation differently; Gen Z is primarily influenced by content posted on Instagram and YouTube while Millennials are primarily influenced by content posted on Facebook and WhatsApp. Factor analysis identified four major factors influencing consumer responses -- Promotional and Emotional Influence; Personalization and Trust; Visual Presentation; and Social Proof -- demonstrating that emotional triggers are used in various ways to shape online shopping behaviors.

SUGGESTIONS

The study provides several practical recommendations that will allow marketers and businesses to improve how they interact with their younger consumer base. One recommendation for all brands is to increase the level of personalization within their marketing strategies. This includes providing individualized recommendations, sending out relevant notifications, and offering personalized deals. These are areas in which Gen Z and Millennial consumers have demonstrated an increased interest in. Another area of focus for brands is the visual representation of their online presence. In particular, brands should provide a visually appealing experience for Gen Z consumers. This would include utilizing engaging layouts, bright color schemes, and providing high-quality images of products. Brands targeting Millennial consumers should utilize tactics that build trust between the brand and the consumer. Examples of this include clearly stating the brand's policy regarding returns/refunds, being open about the brand's intentions through communications, and displaying visible signs of security. Brands may also find success collaborating with influencers, specifically with Gen Z consumers, due to their reliance on social validation from digital influencers. Brands should also develop emotional resonance through their storytelling efforts to engage both Gen Z and Millennial consumers. Narrative based

advertising has been found to develop stronger connections and memories between a brand and its audience. Lastly, brands should tailor their marketing efforts to the platform preferences of their target audience (i.e., Instagram/YouTube for Gen Z; Facebook/WhatsApp for Millennials) to maximize relevance and reach.

LIMITATIONS

This research has limitations due to its reliance on convenience sampling, and therefore cannot be considered representative of all young consumers in Chennai. This research is limited to only two generations (Gen Z and Millennial) and therefore excludes other older generations whose consumption patterns may vary. Because the response data was self-reported, it is possible that there was some form of personal bias in the responses. Finally, since this research was conducted within the city limits of Chennai, it is possible that the degree to which emotions influence purchasing decisions will differ based upon geographic location.

FUTURE SCOPE

To increase generalizability, future research should utilize larger sample sizes across many different urban areas and additional age demographics. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and/or focus groups, could provide greater insight into emotional aspects. In addition, more sophisticated statistical modeling techniques and/or studies into newly emerging forms of digital retail shopping experiences will help us better understand emotionally-triggering micro-behaviors.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research demonstrate the profound influence of micro-emotional triggers on the online buying habits of Gen Z and Millennial consumers in Chennai. Subtle cues such as personalized messages, promotions, visual design features, and social proof mechanisms all contribute to how these young buyers view a brand and ultimately decide whether or not to purchase. Both generations are influenced by emotional triggers; however, they have distinct preferences. Gen Z is drawn to visually appealing, influencer-driven content, while Millennials prefer authentic, trustworthy, and emotionally rich storytelling. Education levels and preferred social media platforms were found to significantly affect consumer behavior. A factor analysis revealed four major emotional dimensions which provide a clear framework

for understanding how various emotional cues interact. This research provides a greater understanding of the emotional drivers of digital purchases and will help companies develop more effective, emotionally intelligent marketing strategies.

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