

From Google to Social Media Search: How Gen Z Uses Social Media and AI Tools for Product Discovery and Purchase Decisions

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Abstract

This study examines how Generation Z consumers search for product information across social media platforms, traditional search engines, shopping platforms, and AI tools. Drawing on an exploratory online survey of 91 Gen Z respondents, the study analyzes platform use, stages of product search, product categories, the perceived usefulness of different tools, credibility cues, and purchase influence. The findings show that Gen Z product search is multi-platform and task-oriented rather than centered on a single search engine. Social media plays a central role in product discovery, access to real-user experiences, visual demonstration, trend identification, comments, and creator recommendations. AI tools are used more often to summarize product options, compare advantages and disadvantages, and explain technical details, whereas Google and shopping platforms remain important for locating official information, comparing prices, checking availability, and making final purchase decisions. The study also finds that credibility in social media product search is shaped by visual evidence, positive comments, trustworthy creators, ordinary users, and recommendations from friends. These findings suggest that social media and AI tools are not simply replacing traditional search. Instead, they are reshaping it into a hybrid, multi-platform process in which Gen Z consumers switch among platforms according to the type of information, form of evidence, and level of credibility they need.

Key words

Generation Z, social media search, product search, AI tools, online credibility

Introduction

With the rise of social media and AI tools, search-

ing for product information has become a cross-platform practice for many young consumers. A person looking for a new restaurant experience or considering the pur-

chase of skincare, a camera, or a pair of shoes may no longer begin with a single Google Search. Instead, the consumer may first encounter a product on TikTok, Instagram, or RedNote/Xiaohongshu and become interested in it; watch short videos or read blog posts to understand how it performs in everyday use; and examine comments to determine whether other consumers agree with the recommendation. When comparing similarly priced products or related models, the consumer may ask an AI tool such as ChatGPT to evaluate the alternatives, use Google to reach official websites, consult shopping platforms for specifications, prices, and availability, and then return to social media for additional real-world examples before making a final purchase. This cross-platform behavior suggests that product search is no longer limited to retrieving information from indexed webpages. It is increasingly shaped by social proof, visual demonstration, algorithmic recommendation, and AI-assisted comparison.

This shift is especially important for understanding Gen Z consumer behavior. Gen Z consumers have grown up in a digital environment in which search engines, social media platforms, shopping platforms, recommender systems, and generative AI tools coexist. Their search behavior is therefore not limited to conventional keyword queries. Earlier research on social search indicates that people turn to social networks because other users can provide context, personal experience, and reassurance that search engines may not always offer (Morris et al., 2010). Research on online credibility likewise shows that users often rely on social and heuristic cues, including group opinion, popularity, and other people's judgments, rather than systematically evaluating every source (Metzger et al., 2010). These findings suggest that consumer decisions depend not only on official product information, but also on how other people describe, demonstrate, and validate their experiences with a product.

Recent research has extended this perspective to short-form video platforms. Entertainment-oriented platforms such as TikTok are increasingly treated as emerging information spaces. O'Brien et al. (2025) argue that TikTok's recommendation system and platform design shape information seeking, discovery, evaluation, and sharing. Other studies suggest that users do not always experience TikTok search as a deliberate search process.

Hassoun et al. (2023) find that Gen Z users often “encounter—rather than search for—information” (p. 1), while Brookbank (2026) argues that TikTok can make search feel invisible to college students because entertainment, advice, personal interests, and information seeking become intertwined. In an earlier internet environment, search typically began with a clearly defined information need. Social media challenges this assumption: product information may first appear through advertising, repeated exposure, creator recommendations, comment sections, and algorithmic feeds, before users recognize that they are engaging in research-like information seeking.

At the same time, social media search raises important credibility concerns. Product recommendations on TikTok, Instagram, and RedNote/Xiaohongshu are persuasive because they are visual, personalized, and timely. Social media search frequently prioritizes images and video: a small set of photographs or a short video can quickly demonstrate the texture of a skincare product, the fit of a dress, the performance of an electronic device, or the atmosphere of a restaurant in ways that text-first traditional search may not communicate as directly. However, businesses can also exploit these affordances through algorithmic promotion and undisclosed sponsored content, blurring the boundaries among authentic experience, influencer marketing, and advertising. Research on TikTok credibility shows that users often rely on source cues, comments, and platform-internal signals when assessing information, while external verification is less consistent (Anter & Kümpel, 2026; Diep & Tran, 2025).

The rise of generative AI tools has made Gen Z search behavior even more complex. Tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, and Perplexity do not provide the same social proof or visual demonstration as social media, but they can quickly summarize alternatives, compare advantages and disadvantages, explain technical specifications, and help users organize large volumes of relevant product information. AI search therefore does not currently replace Google or social media; instead, it has become another component of the product-search process. Consumers may use social media to discover products and assess authenticity, AI to compare alternatives, Google to verify official information, and shopping platforms to evaluate prices and

complete purchases.

Although existing research has examined social search, TikTok information behavior, Gen Z information practices, and credibility assessment on social platforms, less attention has been paid to how Gen Z consumers combine social media, traditional search engines, shopping platforms, and AI tools during product search. This gap matters because product search is an everyday practice in which information behavior directly affects consumer decisions. To address this gap, the present study asks the following questions: How do Gen Z consumers use social media, Google, shopping platforms, and AI tools to search for product information? Which platforms do they prefer at different stages of the purchase process? What types of product information do they associate with social media, AI tools, and traditional search? Finally, which credibility cues influence purchase decisions when product information comes from social media?

The study explores these questions through an exploratory online survey of Gen Z respondents administered through Google Forms. The final analytical sample consisted of 91 participants born between 1999 and 2007. The survey measured platform use, product-search behavior, platform choices across purchase stages and product categories, the perceived usefulness of different tools, credibility cues, verification practices, and purchase outcomes.

The results suggest that product search among this Gen Z sample is best understood as platform-specific and task-oriented. Social media occupies a central role in product discovery, real-world demonstration, comments, trends, and creator recommendations. AI tools are especially useful for summarizing product options, comparing advantages and disadvantages, and explaining technical details. Google and shopping platforms remain important for locating official information, comparing prices, checking availability, and making final purchase decisions. Rather than simply replacing traditional search, social media and AI tools are transforming product search into a multi-platform process in which Gen Z consumers select tools according to the information, evidence, and credibility they require.

Literature Review

Broader research on changing online information behavior indicates that search is no longer confined to keyword queries on traditional search engines. Early studies of social search showed that people sometimes turn to social networks because other individuals can provide context, personal experience, and reassurance that keyword search does not always supply. Morris et al. (2010) compared web search with asking questions through one's social network and found that, although participants generally preferred search engines, social networks provided personalized answers and increased confidence in the validity of the information. The appeal of social media search therefore lies not only in speed or convenience, but also in access to human judgment. Similarly, Metzger et al. (2010) argue that online credibility evaluation is often social and heuristic rather than fully systematic. Users rely on other people, group-based tools, and cognitive shortcuts, reflecting a shift from singular institutional authority toward more distributed forms of authority. Together, these studies help explain why product search on TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and YouTube may appeal to Gen Z: its value lies not only in retrieving information, but also in observing how others experience, interpret, and validate that information.

Recent research has examined TikTok as a distinctive information environment. O'Brien et al.'s (2025) scoping review of 49 studies shows that research on TikTok and information behavior has grown rapidly since 2020, while remaining theoretically underdeveloped. They note that TikTok's recommender system and design features shape information seeking, retrieval, discovery, evaluation, and sharing, whereas concepts such as refinding, avoidance, and discovery remain insufficiently studied. This point is especially relevant to the present study because Gen Z product search often occurs in a hybrid mode: users may actively enter a product or category into a search bar, but they may also encounter products through recommendation feeds, creator videos, comments, and repeated algorithmic exposure. TikTok therefore complicates the boundaries among searching, browsing, and encountering.

Platform affordances help explain why these boundaries become blurred. Drawing on ethnographic

research with young TikTok users in the United Kingdom, Schellewald (2023) shows that scrolling through the For You Page became part of their everyday routines and offered relief, escape, and social meaning. He emphasizes that users do not passively receive TikTok's affordances; rather, they imagine and appropriate the platform in relation to their daily lives. Diep and Tran (2025) apply an affordance perspective more directly to TikTok search. Based on a survey of 494 TikTok users, they find that TikTok is perceived as less valuable than traditional search engines such as Google in terms of convenience, reassurance, independence, privacy, and functionality. At the same time, livestreaming and algorithmic recommendations significantly shape perceived credibility, social presence, and verification behavior. Evaluative actions focus primarily on platform-internal cues, such as comments and video elements, rather than on external official sources. Taken together, these studies suggest that TikTok does not simply replace Google; it provides a different search experience organized around video evidence, social presence, recommendations, and platform-native credibility signals.

This conclusion is especially important for the study of Gen Z. Hassoun et al. (2023) find that Gen Z users often “encounter—rather than search for—information” (p. 1). Their study of 35 Gen Z participants in the United States shows that online information processing is a social practice shaped by identity, group membership, and social motivation rather than only by truth-seeking queries. Their concept of “information sensibility” describes a socially informed awareness of what information matters, to whom it matters, and how it should be interpreted. Jylhä et al. (2024) similarly show that algorithmic recommendations shape young people's everyday information practices. Based on interviews with Finnish adolescents, they argue that recommender systems enable users to delegate search to platforms, producing more passive information practices. Their themes of “enabling not searching” and “inviting high trust” (p. 25) help explain how young users rely on algorithmic feeds while engaging in less active search and evaluation. Gen Z product search may therefore begin not with a clearly articulated query, but through repeated exposure, social circulation, and algorithmic personalization.

Brookbank's (2026) study of college students'

TikTok use further reinforces this argument. Through focus groups, Brookbank found that only some participants used TikTok and that users primarily described the platform in terms of entertainment, advice, and personal interests. Even when participants claimed that they did not proactively search on TikTok, they described behaviors that functioned as information seeking. Brookbank therefore argues that TikTok has made the search process invisible to users. This framework is useful for product-search research because students may not identify watching reviews, saving product videos, reading comments, or following creator recommendations as “research,” even when these practices affect later purchases. Surveys of product search should consequently ask not only whether participants search on TikTok, but also about exposure, browsing, saving, comparison, comment reading, and purchase influence.

Unlike traditional search engines, social media search relies heavily on platform-specific credibility cues and verification practices. Metzger et al.'s (2010) theory of social and heuristic credibility evaluation explains why users may rely on comments, likes, creator identity, platform reputation, and perceived popularity as shortcuts. TikTok's short-video format adds further complexity. Using a seven-day diary study and semistructured interviews with 46 young adults aged 18 to 24, Anter and Kümpel (2026) found that participants were generally skeptical of TikTok's overall credibility but relied heavily on source authority when judging individual posts. Message characteristics played a supporting role, while TikTok's entertainment orientation and visual aesthetics made many credibility cues ambiguous. Verification was primarily internal: participants relied on intuition, prior knowledge, and on-platform comments, while external verification occurred only occasionally. This finding is consistent with Diep and Tran's (2025) evidence that TikTok users' evaluative actions often remain within the platform. In product search, Gen Z users may therefore evaluate claims through comment sections, creator personas, visual demonstration, and perceived authenticity rather than systematically cross-checking official product pages or search-engine results.

Research on health information demonstrates that credibility concerns can extend beyond ordinary consumer preference. Kirkpatrick and Lawrie (2024) examined how young women use TikTok to obtain health

information and encounter misinformation. Their survey shows that young women do obtain health information from TikTok and are more likely to prefer and act on information from health professionals than information from general users. Although their study is not specifically about product search, it demonstrates that TikTok can influence decisions in higher-risk information domains while users continue to distinguish among source types. From a consumer-product perspective, credibility may therefore depend not only on platform choice but also on product category and perceived risk. Beauty products, restaurant recommendations, skincare routines, and health-related supplements may invite different levels of trust, skepticism, and verification.

Three major patterns emerge from this literature. First, social media search is not new, but social platforms make it more complex by combining interpersonal recommendation, algorithmic personalization, and audiovisual demonstration within a single interface. Second, Gen Z information behavior is less linear than traditional search models suggest: information is encountered, circulated, saved, and socially interpreted before it becomes an explicit query. Third, credibility evaluation on TikTok is often platform-native and heuristic, relying on comments, creators, perceived authenticity, and source identity rather than exclusively on external institutional verification. These patterns point to the gap addressed by the present study. Existing research has examined TikTok as an information space, young people's algorithmic information practices, college students' TikTok search behavior, and credibility assessment on TikTok. Less is known, however, about how Gen Z consumers use TikTok and other platforms specifically for product search, or how they decide when to rely on social media, use traditional search engines, and cross-check information across platforms. By focusing on product search, this study examines how platform affordances, social credibility cues, and product category shape Gen Z consumers' movement between social media and traditional search.

Method

This study used an online survey to examine how Gen Z consumers search for product information across traditional search engines, social media platforms, shop-

ping platforms, and AI search tools. The survey was administered through Google Forms. Its purpose was to explore how young consumers select platforms at different stages of the purchase process, assess the credibility of product information, and experience the influence of social media and AI tools on purchase decisions.

The original dataset contained 92 responses. During data cleaning, one abbreviated birth-year response, "03," was recoded as 2003. One respondent born in 1996 was excluded because the respondent fell outside the Gen Z age range used in this study. The final analytical sample therefore included 91 Gen Z participants born between 1999 and 2007. Most participants were students: 33.0% were seniors, 33.0% were juniors, 19.8% were sophomores, 8.8% were graduate students, 3.3% were first-year undergraduates, and 2.2% were not currently enrolled. Participants reported relatively high digital-technology familiarity, with a mean of 3.86 on a five-point scale. Their average daily screen time was 8.56 hours.

The survey included questions about demographic background, daily screen time, social media use, AI-tool use, platform usage frequency, and product-search behavior. Matrix questions asked respondents to select up to three platforms used at different stages of the purchase process, including discovering new products, learning product details, comparing alternatives, checking reviews, finding prices or discounts, and making a final purchase decision. Respondents also identified platforms used for product categories such as restaurants, skincare and beauty, clothing, electronics, and travel activities. In addition, they rated Likert-scale statements concerning social media search, authenticity, comments, social proof, ordinary-user recommendations, and verification behavior.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and basic thematic coding. Multiple-response platform selections were converted into separate binary indicators so that each platform could be counted independently. Percentages were calculated using the final sample of 91 respondents. For Likert-scale items, mean scores and agreement percentages were calculated, with responses of 4 or 5 coded as agreement. Open-ended responses were reviewed for recurring themes in product-search behavior. Because only eight participants completed the open-ended item, these re-

sponses were used to supplement the quantitative findings with illustrative evidence rather than serving as a primary basis for the findings.

Findings

The survey results show that product search among the Gen Z respondents was not organized around a single dominant search engine. The clearest overall pattern was that social media supported product discovery, authenticity judgments, real-user experience, and visual evaluation, whereas AI tools were increasingly used to summarize and compare alternatives. Google and shopping platforms remained relevant for official information, prices, availability, and final purchase decisions.

Finding 1: Product Search Is Multi-Platform, but Social Media Is Central

Within the cleaned Gen Z sample ($N = 91$), 94.5% of respondents reported using social media to search

for product information or recommendations during the previous month. AI tools were also widely used: 69.2% reported using tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, or Perplexity for product information or recommendations during the previous month. When asked to characterize their current product-search behavior, 38.5% said they mainly used social media platforms such as TikTok or Instagram, 24.2% mainly used AI search tools, and 30.8% used Google, social media, and AI search for different purposes. Only 3.3% reported mainly using Google Search.

This pattern indicates that social media search has become part of respondents' everyday product-search routines. At the same time, the substantial proportion of respondents using different tools for different purposes suggests that Gen Z search behavior should not be framed as the simple replacement of Google by TikTok or another social platform. Product search is better understood as a distributed process in which different platforms perform different roles.

Figure 1. Frequent Platform Use

Cleaned Gen Z sample, $N=91$

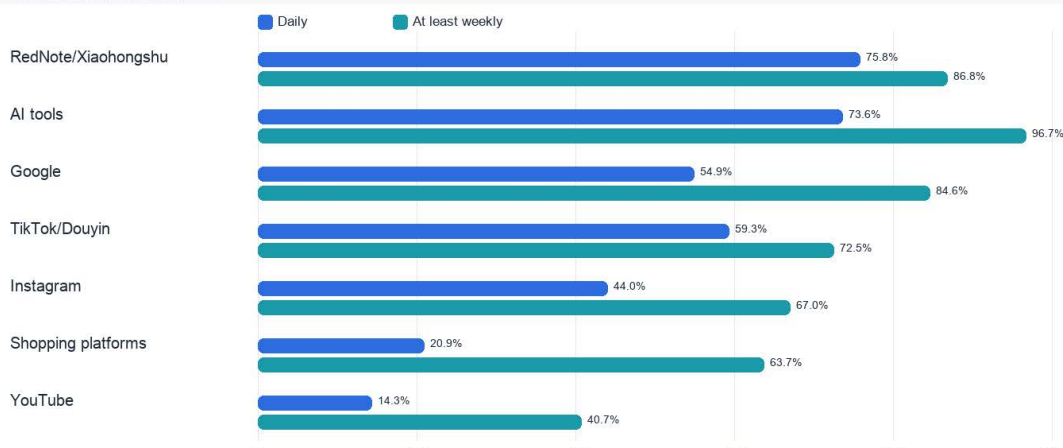


Figure 1. Frequent Platform Use

Finding 2: Social Media Dominates Discovery and Experiential Evaluation

Social platforms were most important during the early and experience-oriented stages of the purchase process. When discovering new products, 80.2% of respondents selected at least one social platform, compared with 24.2% who selected Google and 22.0% who selected AI tools. Social platforms also remained prominent when respondents were learning product details

(72.5%) and checking reviews or real-user experiences (72.5%).

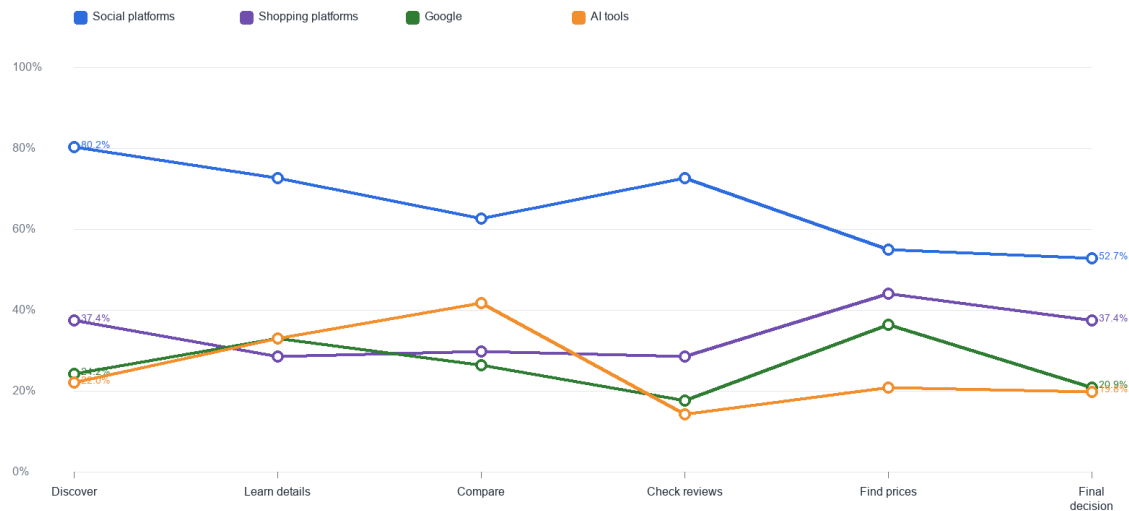
Social media became less dominant during more transactional stages. When respondents searched for prices, discounts, or places to purchase, 44.0% selected shopping platforms and 36.3% selected Google. Shopping platforms and RedNote/Xiaohongshu were among the strongest choices for final purchase decisions. Social media therefore appears especially effective at gener-

ating interest and supporting experiential evaluation, while transactional and final decision stages continue to

involve shopping platforms, Google, and other tools.

Figure 2. Platform Roles Across the Purchase Process

Selection rate by purchase stage, N=91



Note: Respondents could choose up to three platforms per stage, so percentages are not mutually exclusive.

Figure 2. Platform Roles Across the Purchase Process

Finding 3: RedNote/Xiaohongshu Is Especially Important Across Product Categories

RedNote/Xiaohongshu was the most frequently selected platform across all five product categories in this sample. It was selected by 52.7% of respondents for restaurants and cafés, 60.4% for skincare and beauty products, 60.4% for clothing and fashion, 46.2% for electronics and technology accessories, and 61.5% for travel and activities. TikTok/Douyin was also important for lifestyle-oriented categories, particularly clothing

and fashion (36.3%), travel and activities (33.0%), and skincare and beauty products (30.8%).

These results indicate that product category matters. Social media platforms are especially useful when product information depends on visual evidence, taste, lifestyle fit, and other users' experiences. Electronics and technology accessories showed a somewhat different pattern: although RedNote/Xiaohongshu remained the leading platform, AI tools (38.5%) and Google (30.8%) were more prominent than they were for beauty, fash-

ion, or travel. One possible explanation is that technical features and specifications are more readily communicated in text than through visual cues alone. The finding

supports the view that users choose platforms according to the type of information they need, rather than simply according to platform popularity.

Figure 3. Platform Choice by Product Category

Percent selecting each platform before purchase, N=91

	RedNote	TikTok	Google	AI tools	Shopping	Yelp	Instagram	Friends/fam.
Restaurants/Cafes	52.7%	15.4%	27.5%	15.4%	5.5%	40.7%	14.3%	28.6%
Skincare/Beauty	60.4%	30.8%	13.2%	16.5%	16.5%	3.3%	19.8%	22.0%
Clothing/Fashion	60.4%	36.3%	14.3%	8.8%	31.9%	2.2%	20.9%	14.3%
Electronics/Tech	46.2%	25.3%	30.8%	38.5%	19.8%	4.4%	6.6%	13.2%
Travel/Activities	61.5%	33.0%	17.6%	25.3%	6.6%	3.3%	22.0%	18.7%

Darker cells indicate a higher share of respondents selecting that platform/tool.

Figure 3. Platform Choice by Product Category

Finding 4: AI Tools Perform Comparison and Summarization Functions

AI tools were not the primary choice for most forms of experiential product information, but they were important for information-processing tasks. Respondents selected AI tools most often for summarizing product al-

ternatives (48.4%) and comparing advantages and disadvantages (42.9%). AI tools were also the leading choice for product specifications and technical details (34.1%), although social media followed closely at 33.0%.

In contrast, social media was clearly preferred for real-user experiences (62.6%), visual demonstrations

(58.2%), consumer comments and discussions (58.2%), trendy or popular products (70.3%), and influencer or creator recommendations (68.1%). Respondents therefore did not treat AI and social media as interchangeable

search tools. Social media was valued for experiential, visual, and socially validated information, whereas AI tools were valued for organizing information and supporting comparison.

Figure 4. Most Useful Tool by Information Need

Single-choice responses by information type, N=91

	Social media	AI tools	Google	Friends/fam.
Official/brand info	25.3%	30.8%	31.9%	6.6%
Technical details	33.0%	34.1%	23.1%	2.2%
Prices/availability	44.0%	25.3%	17.6%	6.6%
Expert reviews	41.8%	25.3%	19.8%	5.5%
Real user experiences	62.6%	13.2%	6.6%	14.3%
Visual demos	58.2%	17.6%	7.7%	5.5%
Consumer discussions	58.2%	17.6%	5.5%	14.3%
Trendy products	70.3%	12.1%	4.4%	5.5%
Creator recommendations	68.1%	14.3%	5.5%	6.6%
Summarize options	34.1%	48.4%	5.5%	5.5%
Compare pros/cons	38.5%	42.9%	6.6%	6.6%
Personalized recs	47.3%	27.5%	6.6%	13.2%

Darker cells indicate a higher share of respondents selecting that platform/tool.

Figure 4. Most Useful Tool by Information Need

Finding 5: Credibility Is Built Through Visual Evidence, Comments, and Ordinary Users

The survey also indicates that respondents assessed product information through social and visual cues. Most

respondents agreed that TikTok, Instagram, or RedNote helped them understand how a product looks or works in real life (71.4%). They also agreed that comments beneath social media posts influenced purchase decisions (65.9%) and that they trusted recommendations from ordinary users more than brand advertising (67.0%). In addition, 60.4% perceived social media search results as more authentic than Google search results.

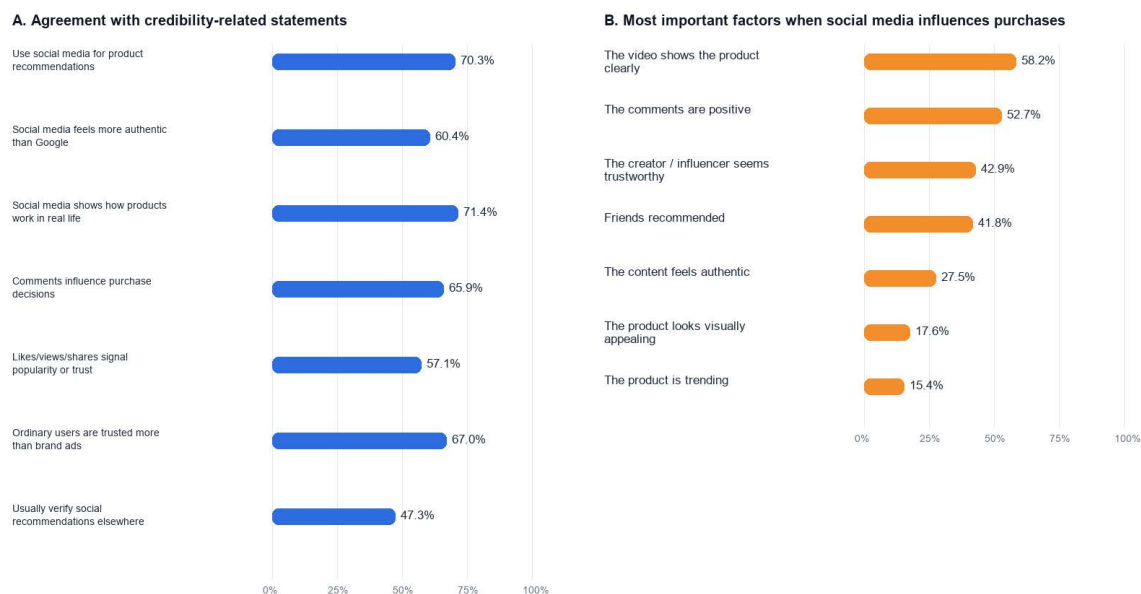
When asked which factors mattered most when social media influenced a purchase decision, respondents most often selected clear product demonstration in the video (58.2%), positive comments (52.7%), a trustworthy creator or influencer (42.9%), and recommenda-

tions from friends (41.8%). Credibility in social media product search was therefore not based solely on formal authority. Instead, it was jointly produced through visual demonstration, social proof, creator trust, and peer recommendation.

Verification behavior, however, was inconsistent. Only 47.3% of respondents agreed that they usually verified social media product recommendations through Google, reviews, or AI tools. Respondents frequently considered social media product information authentic and useful, but did not always verify it through external sources. This finding is central to understanding both the appeal and the risks of social media product search.

Figure 5. Credibility Cues and Purchase Influence

Agreement and selected influence factors, N=91



Panel A reports percent agreeing or strongly agreeing (Likert 4-5). Panel B reports multi-select responses.

Figure 5. Credibility Cues and Purchase Influence

Summary of Findings

Overall, Gen Z product search in this study was platform-specific and task-oriented. Social media was most useful for discovering products, evaluating authenticity, viewing real-world demonstrations, reading

comments, following trends, and obtaining creator recommendations. AI tools were strongest for summarization, comparison, and technical information. Google and shopping platforms remained important for official information, prices, availability, and final purchase decisions. Rather than fully replacing traditional search,

social media and AI tools are reshaping product search into a multi-platform process in which users move among platforms according to their information needs.

Discussion

The findings suggest that Gen Z product search should be understood as a multi-platform, task-oriented process rather than a simple shift from Google to social media. Search is moving from “indexing web pages” toward “indexing people, experiences, and algorithmic feeds.” Social media was deeply embedded in the search behavior of this sample: 94.5% of respondents had used social media to find product information or recommendations during the previous month. Yet traditional search had not disappeared. Respondents moved among social media, AI tools, Google, and shopping platforms according to the stage of the purchase process and the type of information required. Social media and AI tools are therefore not merely replacing traditional search engines; they are reorganizing product search into a more distributed information practice.

One of the study’s most important implications is that social media has the greatest advantage when product information must be visual, experiential, and socially validated. Respondents relied heavily on social platforms to discover new products, examine real-user experiences, view demonstrations, follow trends, and assess creator recommendations. This pattern is consistent with social-search research showing that people value social networks because they provide context, personal experience, and reassurance that search engines may not provide (Morris et al., 2010). It also supports the argument that online credibility assessment often depends on social and heuristic cues rather than fully systematic source evaluation (Metzger et al., 2010). In product search, credibility is often established through visible use, comments, creator identity, and peer validation rather than through official brand information alone.

The findings also extend recent research on TikTok and Gen Z information behavior. Previous studies suggest that TikTok and similar platforms blur the boundaries among searching, browsing, and encountering information (Brookbank, 2026; Hassoun et al., 2023; O’Brien et al., 2025). The present results show that these blurred boundaries also appear in consumer deci-

sion-making. Product search does not always begin with an intentional query. Users may first encounter a product through a recommendation feed, then read comments, save a video, compare similar products, and later search more deliberately through Google, AI tools, or shopping platforms. Product search is thus not a single action but a sequence of movements across platforms. Social media often initiates the process by generating interest and perceived authenticity, while other tools help consumers organize, verify, compare, and complete decisions.

The role of RedNote/Xiaohongshu is particularly notable. It was the most frequently selected platform before purchase across all five product categories. This result requires cautious interpretation because the sample included many respondents familiar with Chinese or transnational platform ecosystems. Nevertheless, the finding shows that Gen Z social search cannot be reduced to TikTok alone. Public discussion often asks whether TikTok is “the new Google,” but the present study points to a broader platform ecology in which different social platforms may specialize in different forms of product knowledge. RedNote/Xiaohongshu was especially prominent for lifestyle, beauty, fashion, restaurant, and travel information, categories that depend on visual examples, ordinary-user reviews, and detailed experiential posts. Future research should therefore compare multiple social platforms rather than treating TikTok as the sole example of social search.

The study also contributes by examining AI tools. AI occupied a distinct position in Gen Z product search: respondents did not primarily use it for social proof, real-user experience, or visual demonstration, but for summarizing product options, comparing advantages and disadvantages, and understanding technical details. Generative AI therefore functions more as an information organizer than as a direct substitute for social media. Within a product-search workflow, social media helps consumers discover products and judge perceived authenticity, AI helps structure choices and comparisons, and Google and shopping platforms support official information, price checks, availability, and final purchases. This division of labor demonstrates the increasingly hybrid character of search: users combine algorithmic feeds, conversational AI, traditional search, and commerce platforms to complete a single decision.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First,

because the study relied on a convenience sample composed primarily of students, the findings should not be treated as representative of all Gen Z consumers. They provide an exploratory account of how one Gen Z sample used social media, Google, shopping platforms, and AI tools in product search and purchase decision-making. Second, convenience sampling produced a demographic profile consisting largely of Chinese international students studying in the United States. Many participants may therefore have been especially familiar with platforms such as RedNote/Xiaohongshu and Douyin, and their habits may not reflect those of all Gen Z populations in the United States or worldwide. Third, self-reported survey responses may not fully capture actual search behavior. Respondents may forget certain search actions, underestimate passive exposure, or describe their practices differently from how they occur. Fourth, the small number of open-ended responses meant that qualitative examples served primarily as illustrations rather than as a major source of evidence.

Future research could extend this study in several directions. Larger and more diverse samples could test whether the observed patterns hold across national contexts, cultural backgrounds, and platform ecosystems. Search diaries and screen-recording studies could capture how users actually move across platforms during real purchase decisions. Interviews could investigate why users trust social media recommendations, when they decide to verify information, and how they distinguish authentic content from advertising. Future research could also compare product categories with different levels of risk, including fashion, restaurants, electronics, skincare, supplements, and health-related products. Finally, researchers should continue to examine how generative AI changes product search over time as AI becomes increasingly integrated into search engines, shopping platforms, and social media interfaces.

Conclusion

This study examined how Gen Z consumers use social media, Google, shopping platforms, and AI tools to search for product information. Based on an exploratory survey of 91 Gen Z respondents, the findings show that product search is increasingly multi-platform and task-oriented. Social media plays a central role in prod-

uct discovery, real-user experience, visual demonstration, comments, trends, and creator recommendations. AI tools are especially useful for summarizing product options, comparing advantages and disadvantages, and understanding technical details. Google and shopping platforms remain important for official information, prices, availability, and final purchase decisions.

The principal conclusion is that Gen Z product search is neither simply shifting from Google to TikTok nor being fully replaced by AI. Instead, it is becoming a distributed process in which different platforms provide different forms of evidence. Social media offers vivid and socially validated information; AI tools organize and compare alternatives; and Google and shopping platforms support verification, official information, and purchase logistics. Gen Z consumers move among these tools according to what they want to know and the type of credibility they require.

The study further shows that credibility in social media product search is constructed through visual and social cues. Respondents were strongly influenced by clear product demonstrations, positive comments, trustworthy creators, ordinary users, and recommendations from friends. These cues make social media product information feel authentic and useful, but they also create risks when users do not consistently verify recommendations outside the platform. The gap between perceived authenticity and external verification is one of the most important issues raised by this study.

Overall, this research contributes to the study of digital information behavior by showing how Gen Z product search operates within a hybrid platform environment. As search continues to expand across social platforms, AI tools, and commerce systems, understanding how young consumers evaluate and combine these sources will become increasingly important for researchers, educators, marketers, and platform designers.

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