

Digital Marketing Platform Tools, Generation Z, and Cultural Considerations

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This paper summarizes results of a longitudinal study of Generation Z and their use of digital marketing platforms. It expands current research by integrating culture theories into this analysis. In this way Generation Z can be seen as a niche market and as a subculture worthy of further analysis for business, marketers, and digital marketing educators.

Keywords: digital marketing, generation Z, culture, business, marketers, educators

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to research university Generation Z students' perceptions of marketers' use of social and consumer digital platforms, their outcomes, related marketing actions, as well as the relevant, possible business and digital marketing ramifications. In today's business world, marketing is being urged to utilize various social and consumer digital platforms to grow businesses. The purpose of this study is to research university Gen Z students' perceptions of marketers' use of social and consumer digital platforms, their outcomes, related marketing actions, as well as the relevant, possible business ramifications. This research includes two studies, one about digital marketing platforms and brand management and other research about generations. Little research has combined marketing tools', including social platforms, social media usage, outcomes, data, influence with Gen Z university students. Limited research has studied university students' perceptions and outcomes about marketer's use of these platforms. There is very limited study of how culture theories may impact these findings. Therefore, the need exists to conduct this research, and marketers and other business professionals, educators, and students who are consumers will gain additional information and possible insights related to these very cogent business issues.

My research included the investigation of this data and its analysis' impact on university students as customers. This can include SEO factors. The results were quantitatively analyzed for closed questions or multiple-choice questions. Fill-in the blank, open question data was analyzed using open coding, closed coding, and axial coding. Open coding will be used to identify themes found in the data, closed coding to refine themes, and axial coding to facilitate content analysis (Miller & Salkind, 2002). The information was grouped using the syntactical, and thematic approaches (Cooper & Schindler, 2003).

Not only is the use of social platforms relevant in the marketer's Product Strategy and Promotion Strategy, it has also evolved to be part of the marketing Distribution strategy. Social and consumer platforms need to be considered as digital channels (Smith, Wollan Zhou, 2011; Evans, 2012).

“Additionally, college students is a niche market for whom companies want to promote goods, because college students can form their future purchase intentions and last a long time....Factors [that can influence students] of their personal purchase behavior: specified tastes, high quality of service, information collection, and ego. ... Their factors of impulsive purchasing intentions include purchase as will, brand, layout of goods, and promotions (Liang, Wang, Chu, Lin, Chen, 2015, para 1). Social and company digital platforms are part of ecommerce. Digitization to provide customers with targeted, just-in-time product or service information is an effective and seamless way as a focal point (Bommel, Edelman, Ungerman). “Over the last decade, social media marketing has become an indispensable tool in the arsenal of brands and businesses of all kinds, with opportunities to build relationships, engage with customers, and increase sales...Research from...Digitas predicts that the growth of social commerce could make it a business worth \$30 billion before the end of 2017” (McCarthy, 2015). Furthermore, it is recognized that the strength of a company’s brand is contingent upon external stakeholders. There is a “significance and interactivity of exchanges between brands and consumers” (DeMers, 2017).

As noted above, limited research has been conducted involving Gen Z university students. Research done by Muk led to some relevant findings. “[The research contributed to an] understanding in terms of what influences them to become fans of brand pages and how they perceive brand pages on social media. Trusting brand relationship provides consumers meaningful benefits and security that makes them loyal customers. ... The findings also suggest that young consumers' intentions to join brand pages are positively related to the social pressure exerted on them by their important peers” (2013).

The generational perspective on this topic is significant. Gen Z are strong users of social and consumer platforms for a variety of reasons. However, there is very limited research on this groups’ intent and results when they use social and consumer platforms for business-related purposes. “Recent studies on young people show that Gen Zs (aged 17 and under) are more inspired than Gen Ys and Xs to want to change the world for the better...The majority of consumers believe that brands should align with greater social needs by donating products, services, money and volunteering. ... Through appealing to a sense of solidarity and community, brands could promote a sense of civic duty, not because it makes them look good, but because it is the right thing to do (Clifford, 2014). “With such a large percentage of the public using social media – Pew Research Center reports 70 percent – businesses can’t afford not to interact with customers via channels like Facebook, Twitter and other social platforms” (Bowers, 2017, August 3). Therefore, this study will add to the literature regarding the social and consumer platforms that best engage the university-student target market segments. As noted by Davis (2020), because GenZers have a spending power of \$143 billion and will account for 40% of global consumers this year, “it’s clear that retailers and brands need to invest in researching how this new generation shops”.

Furthermore, this research investigates the intended outcomes, from a marketing standpoint, of Gen Z university students when they utilize social and consumer platforms “Over 80% of the respondents chose ‘knowing how are things going on with people I know’ as the major reason of using Facebook, which is consistent to previous studies. Among the respondents who have joined fan pages, over half of them claimed the main purpose was ‘to receive discounts and promotion’ or ‘to get updates on future products.’ It is suggested that updating product information and offering sales promotion may be more effective strategies for companies to attract Facebook users” (Cheung, Leung, 2016). “Marketing research focuses on user profiling in order to improve and predict sales. These studies make great strides towards understanding networked social behavior” (Marabelli, Page, Kane, 2016, para 1).

Furthermore, in analyzing the data, it became clear that seeing Generation Z as a sub-culture enhanced the understanding and possible applications for this research. As Nathan states, “Individuals have multiple modes of being, which are based in many aspects of multiple collective identities” (2015, p.109). “Marketing strategies are always changing along with the changeable consumer behaviors” (Imran, M, 2014, cited in Demers, 2017, para. 1) and Gen Z can be seen as a niche market with intersecting cultural dimensions. It is posited that an individual is the product of several subcultures and these can influence individuals and possibly predict their behavior (Magala, 2005). This paper will discuss those factors that can be considered during this process.

Throughout this study, there was every attempt not to stereotype or falsely generalize findings about the larger Gen Z group to specific individuals within this generation.

METHODOLOGY

This study investigated Generations Z college students' views regarding truthfulness, use of social media and other digital marketing tools, and related issues. The variables studied relate to current literature and key indicators representative of this generation. Students were surveyed in business courses after permission of the instructor was attained. Surveys were focused on Gen Z views, and due to the longitudinal nature of this research, subsequent surveys were done with Gen Z students about their use of digital marketing tools.

The study employed web-based questionnaires for quantitative methods during 2017, 2018, and 2019. The questionnaire included multiple choice and fill-in-the blank question types. During Stage 1, which is reported in this paper, a sample of 165 participants were the student participants groups. The university in which the research was conducted is a small private institution.

DIGITAL NATIVES CONNECT AND INFLUENCE

Based upon extensive research, the following will be the normative birth years for the Generation Z discussed here. (Brackets show dates frequently mentioned, as well.) Generation Z was born 1994 [1992;1997;1998]-2004 [2010; 2013]) (Pew Research; US Census; 2008 World at Work; Insight: They Really Are Different; Codrington (2019); Sujansky, J. Ferri-Reed (2009); Rainmakerthinking.com; Brown (2005); Strauss and Howe; Schroth, 2019. Please note, the brackets show other time frames for this generation which some demographers or marketers use as guideposts.) Generation Z have "a unique set of behaviors and attitudes That set it apart from the generation before it....this generation represents 23% of the United States population...they are very comfortable with online shopping and the use of social media to recommend products to friends and to look for product recommendations (Hamstra, 2018). Marketing researchers have termed them to be digital natives. Various the digital marketing platforms are ingrained in their lives.... The digital tools that they use go beyond social media to various technology including delivery and cashless payments (Navigating the next generation of consumers, 2017).

CULTURAL GENERATIONAL INFLUENCERS

This paper analyzes students who are members of generation Z's views on social media platforms. This information is constructed with cultural descriptions that can be extrapolated to refer to this generation. Hofstede's, and Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner's, and Hall's dimensions will give insight into possible reasons behind Gen Z members favor social media and have various views on digital media platforms. Because this research was conducted in the United States, Hofstede's, Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner', and Hall's views about the United States will be included as foundational considerations. This work can help to enhance the reciprocal shaping of marketing practices and cultural systems (Fischer, 2019). Although it has been noted that "the velocity of change in modern media culture is so fundamentally disruptive that adapting to the shift is no longer a matter of choice but an absolute necessity for marketers' long-term sustainability and survival" (Lavecchia, 2015), that view of culture will not be the main focus of this paper. For this paper, it is followed that cultures exist in continuous flux, continuously interpreted and reinterpreted through human interactions, and embedded within the context of the lives of the members of the cultures (Pal, Dutta, 2008, cited in L'Entang, 2012).

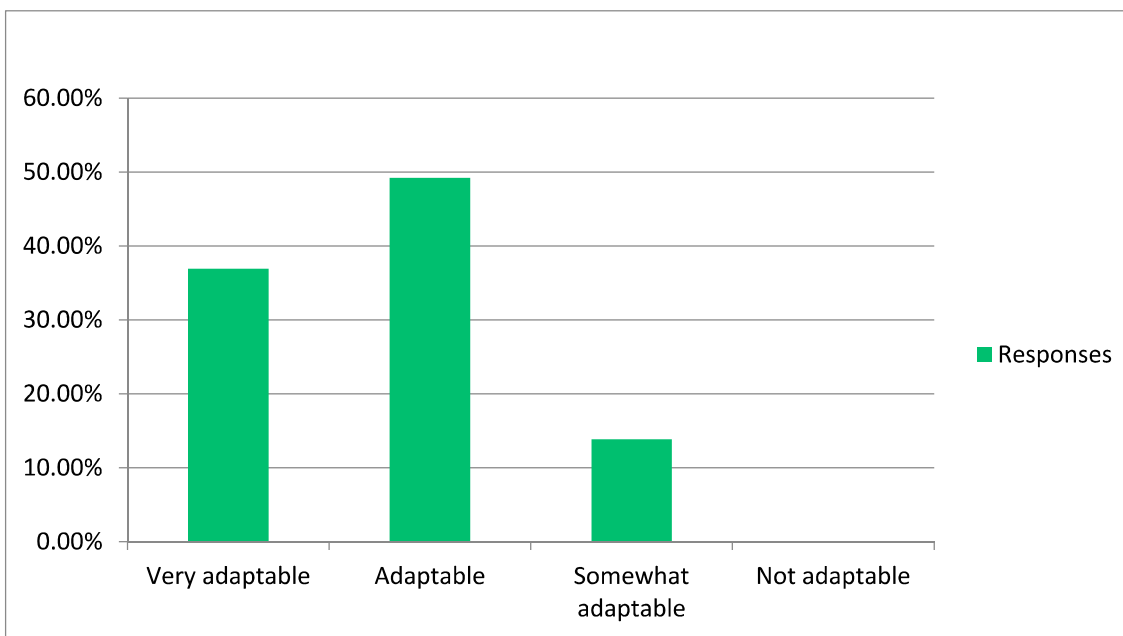
Culture is generally seen as a largely, though not exclusively, human production, which has "spiritual, organizational, and material items" involving "human knowledge, opinions, convictions, values and beliefs" (Smajs, 2006, p. 636,cited in L'Entang, 2012, Anthropology and ethnography, para 1). Furthermore, according to Hofstede culture is the collective mental programming of the human mind

which distinguishes one group of people from another (2020). Cultural categories are considerably more diverse than ethnic/national levels (L'Entang, 2012). Culture is both a carrier of traditions and a site of transformation. It is within this dialectical tension between tradition and transformation that identities and relationships become meaningful, suggesting the necessity of conceptualizing public relations within an organic framework of evolving relationships rather than within a simplistic modernist frame that seeks to develop the best strategy for a national culture based on predefined markers. (Pal, Dutta, 2008, cited in L'Entang, 2012). Therefore, Gen Z is considered as a significant sub-culture that involves those individuals' human knowledge opinions and values and believes. Given the age of this group, their transformation and intersection of relationships is meaningful to the study of digital marketing.

Culture is relevant to marketing and as a key variable in research for global products and services. It has been shown that companies must understand how cultural factors affect the adoption and interaction within social networking sites. Although some major cultural theorists use national culture as a framework, it has been shown that cultural differences are not restricted to physical boundaries (Alarcón-del-Amo, Lorenzo-Romero, Gómez-Borja, 2016). Therefore, although as noted above the United States will often be a focus of this paper, the findings may be extrapolated to other regions of the world.

Furthermore Alarcón-del-Amo, María-del-Carmen; Lorenzo-Romero, Carlota; Gómez-Borja, Miguel-Ángel (2016) have analyzed culture as a moderating effect of causal relationships existing in social networking sites. Therefore, it is relevant to consider digital marketing platforms, including social media, within this context. Additionally, culture moderates certain relationships and the acceptance and use of certain social networking sites. Gen Z has grown up in an entirely digital world, giving them a totally new outlook that marketers are now racing to understand (Brazilian, 2017). This has led them to be adaptable. Indeed, research has shown they perceive themselves in this way. (Please refer to Figure 1.)

FIGURE 1
HOW ADAPTABLE TO NEW IDEAS OR WAYS OF DOING THINGS ARE YOU?



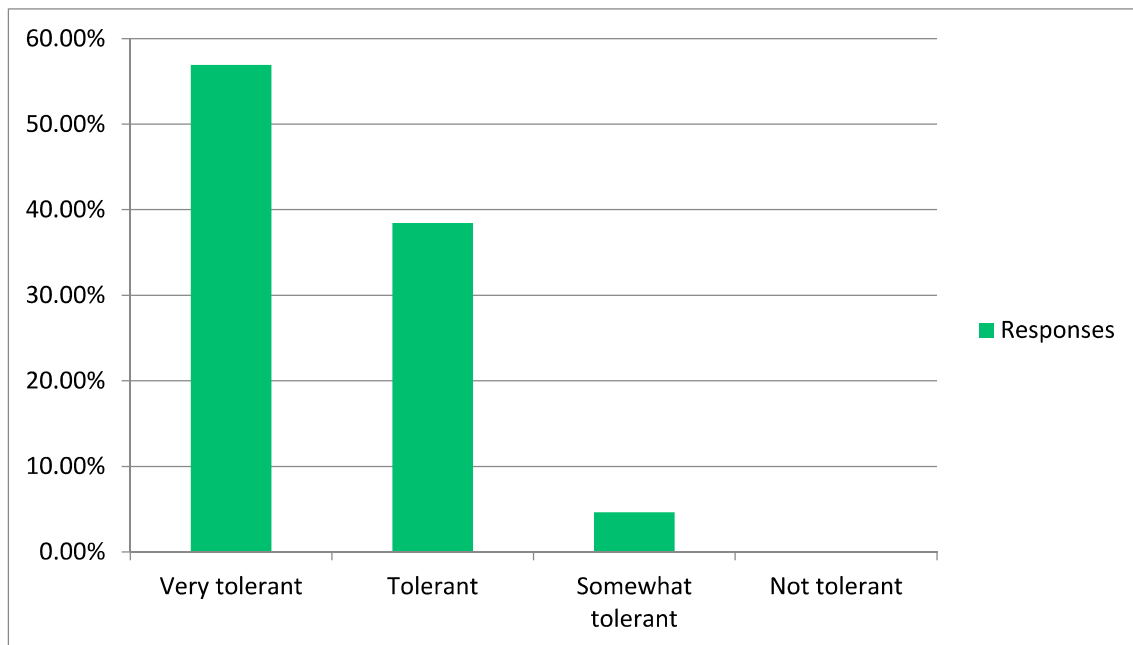
Hofstede describes various cultural dimensions including power distance, which he defines as the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power to be distributed unequally. The fundamental issue about this dimension is how a culture handles in equality among people. The United States is seen to have a relatively small (40 on the dimension scale) power distance. This correlates to the more egalitarian nature of much social media. Although there is a status that is

assigned in social media and certainly power can be attained through active use of social media, younger generations are frequent users of this platform in order to convey their thoughts and opinions regardless of their relative youth and or lack of experience in a particular area. The inherent connectivity of social media and various digital platforms may equate to a lower power distance in many regards. Furthermore, newer culture theorists are stating that investigating existing cultural practices, discourses, so on, may improve the social understanding of media. This includes ongoing economic and social struggle for power (Hoof, Boell, Boell, Beverungen, Beyes, Conrad, 2019).

Another Hofstede dimension is individualism, which is defined as a preference for a loosely net social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves. High individuation in the United States (91 on the dimension scale) may impact a person’s ability to select which digital marketing platforms and social advocacy groups that one believes are relevant to them. Yet, the other end of this spectrum is collectivism which is defined as a preference for a tightly knit framework in which individuals can expect the members of a particular in-group to look after each other in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. Therefore, once members of Generation Z have selected particular digital marketing platforms and subgroups or cultures within those platforms, the latter aspect of this dimension helps one to understand the pressure of social media on Generation Z members, and the marketing power of those who are perceived to be digital social influencers of behavior for this generation.

Despite what can be perceived as rigidity within these dimensions, the Hofstede group states that “This does not imply that everyone in a given society is programmed in the same way; there are considerable differences between individuals” (2020, Description, para. 2). Therefore, there may be an inherent acceptance within Gen Z members that individuals within that generation will self-select themselves into various micro niches within these social media platforms. One’s presence or membership in a subgroup can be temporary. Indeed, research has shown that Generation Z perceives them to be tolerant of diverse cultures. (Please refer to Figure 2). Pew research showed that Gen Zers believe that diversity is "a good thing for our society" (Allen, 2019, para. 2).

FIGURE 2
HOW TOLERANT ARE YOU OF DIVERSE CULTURES?

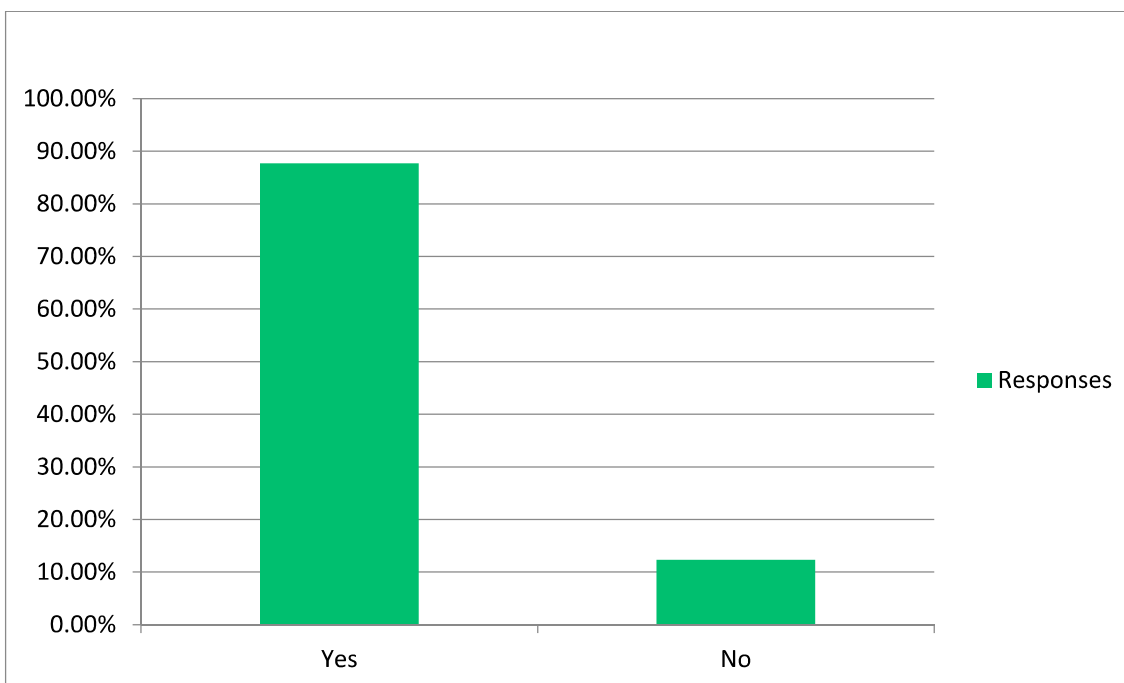


Marketers, as well as entire companies, are adjusting to the incoming GenZ. “We are in the midst of redoing our society,” says Katz, “and it’s happening really fast and in a really messy way.” These issues

have taken a toll on Generation Z. “They are growing up in a different environment. . . . And the pace of change is like nothing we have experienced. . . . They are more careful about curating their digital presence and using it to build a personal brand” (Piore, 2019, para 34). If cultural theory is extrapolated to Gen Z, with an important note not to stereotype and to realize that there will be individual differences for this age group, it is useful for marketers to look at the social media platforms that are frequently used by members of this generation. For example, research has been done to study how users of Instagram record their culture (Calishain, 2019). Members of Gen Z are very aware that they are part of a consumer culture with some distinguishable characteristics. This generation has influenced marketing's increased use of storytelling to engage consumers (Hackley, Hackley, 2015), including members of Gen Z.

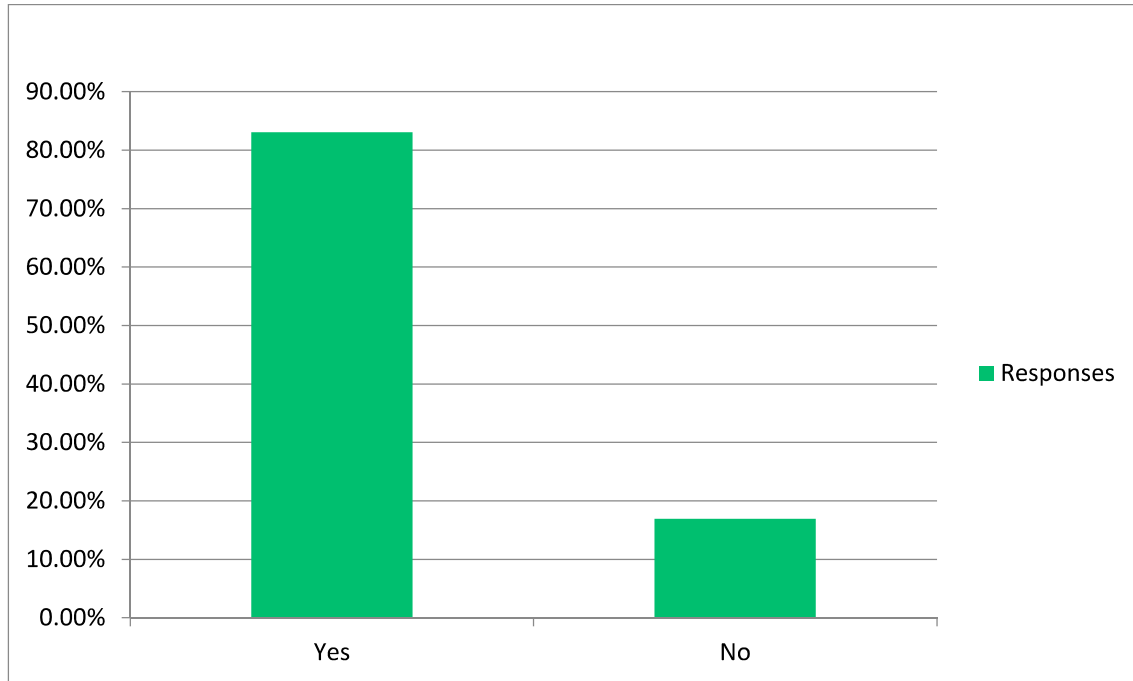
Another notable theory about culture was developed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner. Recently they have studied students in their culture research and note that there are generational differences. They state that they have observed that “younger people” (2012). (Note, they do not mention Gen Z. per se, in this book.) They note that they are more particularistic, which would mean that they believe that their responses, to a situation that affects their circumstances and the roles that they live by, may change. Interestingly this contrasts with the view often presented by these theorists that the United States is more of a universalist culture. The theorists also state that the younger generation is more communitarian, which would imply that they believe the group is more important than the individual. Again, this is an interesting contrast to their general view that the United States culture is individualistic. As noted above, when discussing Hofstede there may be a paradoxical situation that exists within this generation. Furthermore, these theorists state that the younger generation is more diffuse. This observation would lead one to think that this generation sees an overlap between their work and personal life. Clearly other information seems to represent that that is the case. It is important for this generation to build a good relationship. This corresponds to research that shows that Generation Z sees themselves are connected to many different people. (Please refer to Figure 3.)

FIGURE 3
I FEEL CONNECTED TO MANY PEOPLE



Digital marketing platforms, including social media, are avenues for those connections. (Refer to Figure 4.)

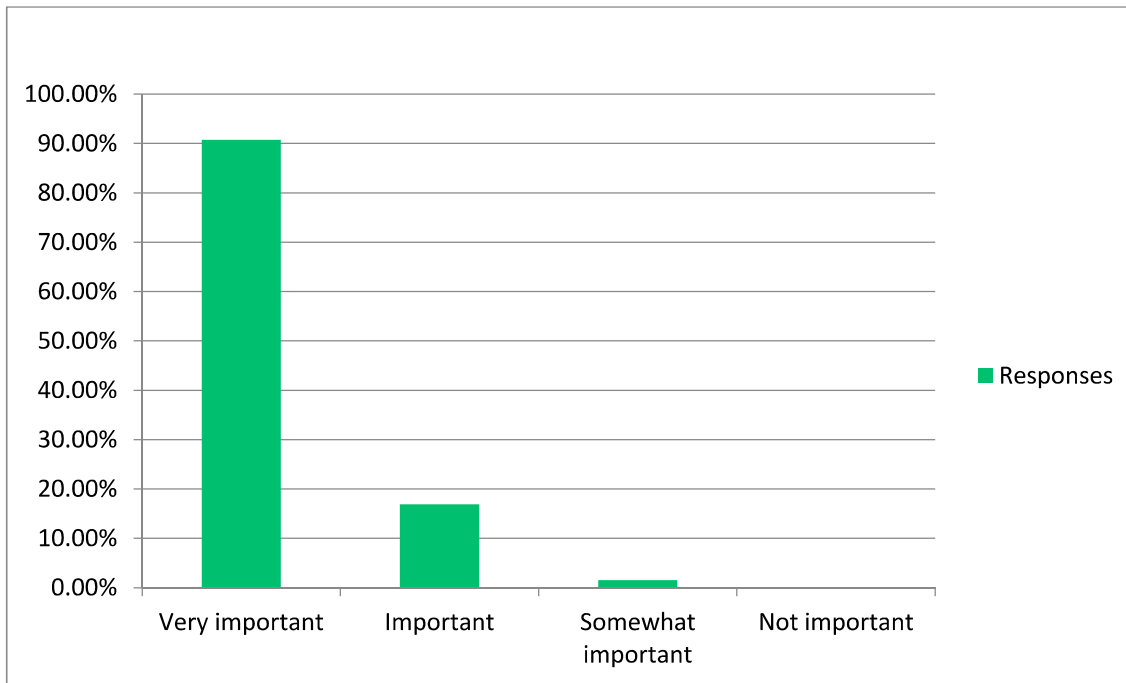
FIGURE 4
I AM CONNECTED TO MANY PEOPLE THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA



Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012) see the younger generation as more ascription oriented. It then follows that Gen Z sees access to social media platform as part of digital marketing tools and platforms expected to be free and gratification of basic human privilege to enjoy life and have fun—although remotely.

This generation, like the generation before it can be skeptical because of the transparency of digital marketing platforms. Gen Z has been found to be more skeptical than millennials (Stein, 2013). Therefore, truthfulness is important to them. This can extrapolate to a consideration of whether social media is considered trustworthy. (Refer to Figure 5.) The connectivity of social media will strengthen Gen Z's generation's ability to tie together the various members of their more egalitarian organizations.

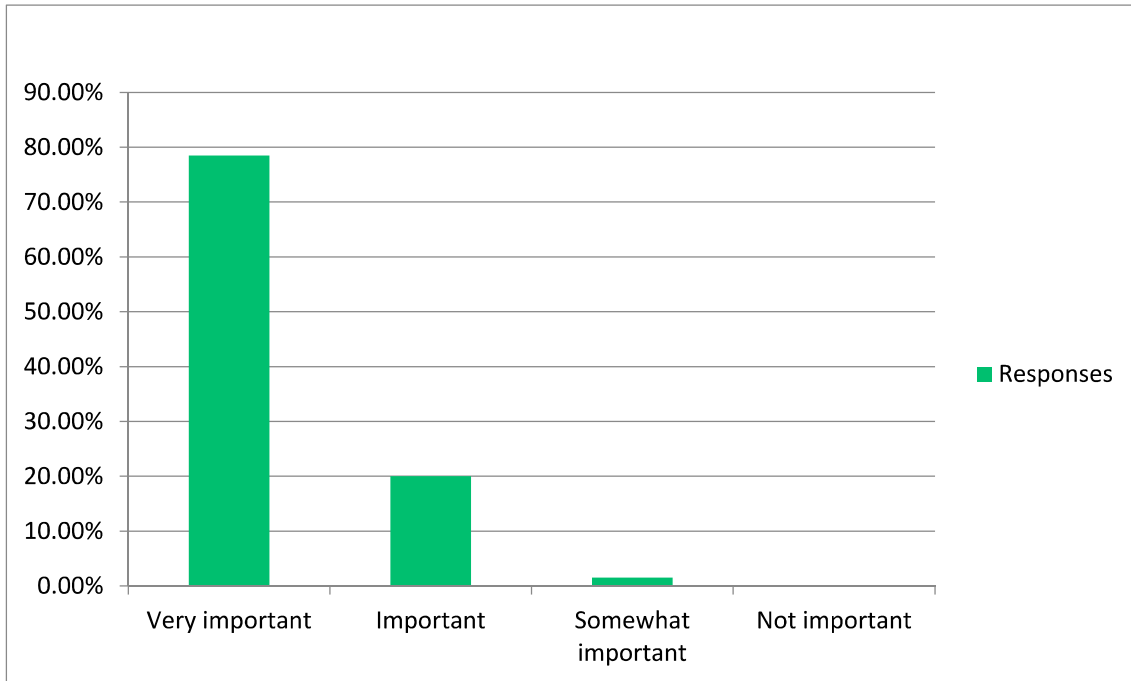
FIGURE 5
HOW IMPORTANT IS TRUTHFULNESS IN SOMEONE YOU INTERACT WITH?



Another key element for this generation is trust. “These brand relationships provide consumers meaningful benefits and security that makes them loyal consumers” (Liang, Wang, Chu, Lin, Chen, 2015, para 1). Trust is an important ingredient in successful marketing. Trust has been an indirect determinant of intention to use and having a direct effect through attitude (Shin, 2010, as cited in Alarcón-del-Amo, Lorenzo-Romero, Gómez-Borja, 2016). Furthermore, these authors note that trust influences perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use and attitude, and indicates that people managing social network sites in organizations need to stimulate users’ trust by conducting various actions.

Although there may not be a direct link between national culture and generational culture, it has been shown that trust has a lesser effect on the behavior of individuals with a high degree of uncertainty avoidance. The United States shows a low degree of uncertainty avoidance (Yoon, 2019, as discussed in Alarcón-del-Amo, Lorenzo-Romero, Gómez-Borja, 2016). In contrast to this national view, the Gen Z sub-culture may show a different view, seeking trusting relationships. (Refer to Figure 6.) Gen Zers respond positively to brands that are more relational and, therefore, are perceived as authentic. A “cultural narrative” about Gen Zers shows they care about “connections and community” (Davis, 2020, para 12).

FIGURE 6
HOW IMPORTANT IS IT THAT YOU TRUST SOMEONE YOU INTERACT WITH?

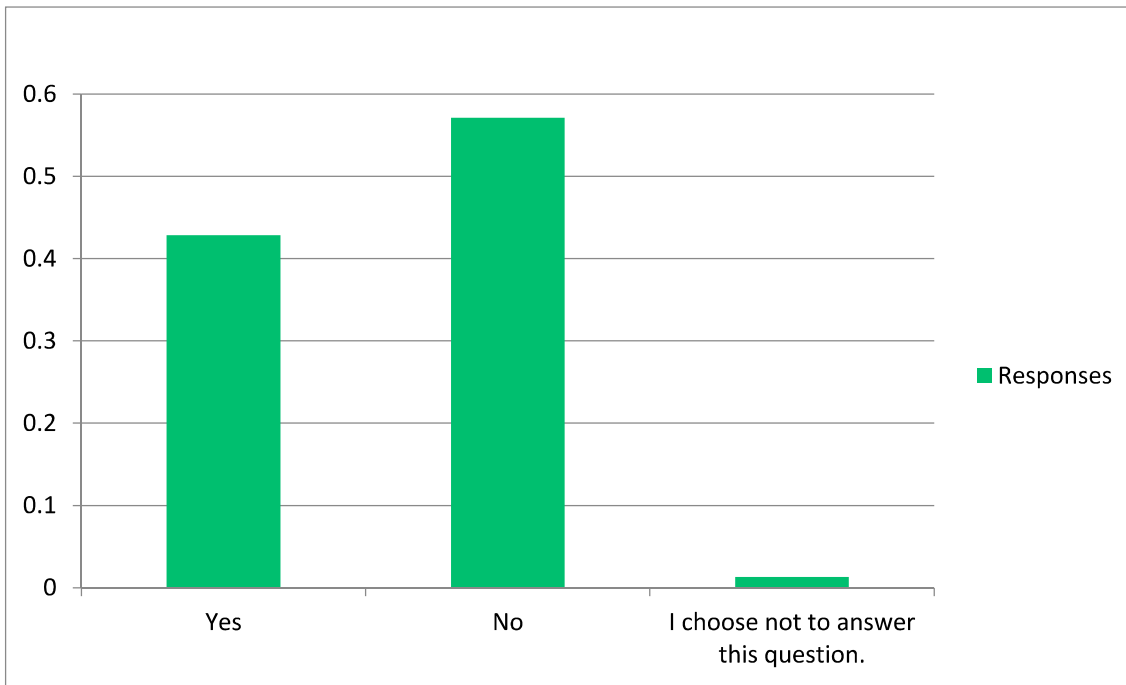


TECHNOLOGICAL INFLUENCES ON CULTURE

Generation Z is part of the culture of connectivity (Van Dijck, as cited in Branham, 2017) and the “selfie culture” in which consumers are heavily influenced by social media and by their peers (Gault, 2017). Yet, because they are digital natives, it may be said that these cultural boundaries are perceived as permeable (Jacob, 2005) and shifting given technological changes. One characteristic of Generation Z is their active use of technology. This researcher next investigated the students’ use of technology. Fudin states, “They have a positive attitude towards technology and are not afraid to try new things. Because they’re comfortable exploring the Internet, they’re more connected to the world than previous generations. When they’re curious about a subject, they’ll often research it online” (2012, para 2).

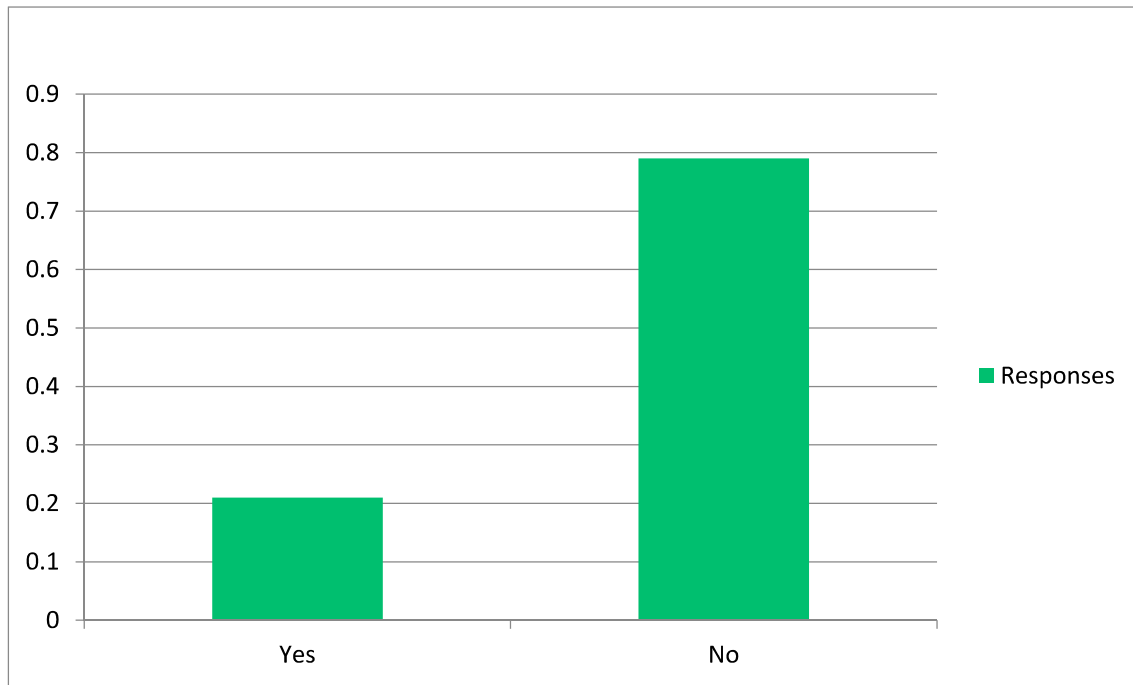
These findings detail why this attitude may exist. Correspondingly, Slavin (2014) noted that Gen Zers want to be heard and want to actively participate in what's happening in the world. Fischer (2019) discusses the connectivity with an example of Twitter using algorithms to personalize the Tweet to which a user is exposed. This has helped to enhance the relevance of social media and it is posited as a strength of a Gen Z subculture. Yet, this sub-culture, as mentioned above, adheres to being adaptable and not necessarily following previously held rules. Therefore, research has shown that they may refer to apps before making purchases, but those apps may not directly influence their final purchase. (Refer to Figure 7.)

FIGURE 7
DO YOU USE APPS TO INFLUENCE YOUR PURCHASING PROCESS?
(FOR EXAMPLE, A TARGET STORE APP.)



As noted above, truthfulness is a key important element for this generation. Because of the growth and use of social media by this sub-cultural generation, it has been debated in marketing if companies should hold secrets about their actions or should they be more transparent. Is more transparency the expectation of the consumer, and if the company does not fulfill that in their social media does it lead inadvertently to an element of distrust (Duff, 2011). Notice that most university students' participants in this study did not allow pre-planned purchases to be influenced by app suggestions. (Refer to Figure 8.)

FIGURE 8
IF YES, WERE YOUR PRE-PLANNED PURCHASES INFLUENCED BY THESE
“SUGGESTIONS”?



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Marketers are increasingly monitoring the actions of Generation Z by viewing this group of consumers not only as a generation but also as a subculture of the larger consumer driven societal culture of the United States, and by applying various cultural concepts and theories to an analysis of Generation Z, marketers may gain additional insights into this micro segment and potential niche opportunities. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner note, “Considering changes in cases in which cultures are consumers... invites marketers to study changing characteristics of their buyers” (2011, p.316). Sridharan, Barrington, and Saunders (2017) note that the study of macro markets can lead to a better understanding of micro markets which then can ultimately in cyclically lead to a higher understanding of a macro market. After analyzing sure digital marketing platforms, by studying Generation Z as a micro market this research may influence future macro marketing segmentation techniques, which then may ultimately lead to a more sophisticated micro niche analysis and data mining for Generation Z.

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