

Social Media, Gen Z and Consumer Misbehavior: Instagram Made Me Do It

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It has long been held that consumer misbehavior could be attributed to a number of motivations, the strongest of which was the pressure of living in a consumption-oriented society and the heavy influence of marketing. The findings in this study suggest that with the influence of social media, Generation Z consumers are feeling internal pressure, in turn impacting their moral compass and leading to misbehavior in the marketplace. While commercial pressures are also recognized, this is the first empirical evidence that there might be a different, primary motivation.

Keywords: consumer behavior, consumer misbehavior, social media influence, social pressure

INTRODUCTION

Consumer misbehavior is a pervasive issue impacting the economy and the interests of businesses, marketers, and other consumers. Representing the negative side of consumers, consumer misbehavior is an umbrella of negative behavioral activities that “violate the generally accepted norms of conduct in consumption situations, and thus disrupt the consumption” (Fullerton, 2004). The 2019 National Retail Security Survey found that negative consumer behaviors lead to an average shrink rate of 1.38% which is an estimated \$50.6 billion impact on the retail industry (NRF, 2019), suggesting the need to further understand and prevent consumer misbehavior.

Fullerton (2004) argued that consumer misbehavior was based on one of 7 motives that include unfulfilled aspirations, deviant thrill-seeking, absence of moral constraints, differential association, pathological socialization, provocative situational factors and calculating opportunism. Since this time, consumers have significantly changed their shopping behaviors due to their increasing use of the internet and social media. In 2004, \$117 billion was spent online, compared to \$517.36 billion in 2018 (Gonsalves, 2005; Ali, 2019). According to Pew Research (2019), only 7% of young adults used social media in 2004. Today, that number is 90%, with nearly all young adults using social media.

We posit that this drastic change in consumer spending and influence is a more likely motive for consumer misbehavior today, especially as it pertains to young adults, or Generation Z. This generation was born between approximately 1995 and 2015 and is made up of 74 million young people. They are the first truly digital generation that grew up with social media, technology, and iPhones. Social media immersion is a defining aspect of this generation. "Gen Z spend nearly nine hours a day listening to

media, looking at a screen or on a device. Including time spent multitasking; they are exposed to over 13 hours of media a day on average" (IPSOS MORI, 2018, p.78). Other research stresses that social media use comes with its risks, including anxiety, bullying, peer pressure, and lower self-esteem (Brooks, 2015; Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian & Halliwell, 2015). Madden (2017) points out the negative impact of media saturation, such as a shorter attention span, and a constant need for entertainment.

Generation Z is the next generation of consumers whose interests and behaviors will be relevant to businesses. This study intends to understand the behaviors and intentions of Generation Z in the context of consumer misbehavior both offline and online. We seek to demonstrate that this group of consumers are significantly influenced by and feel pressure from social media, which can in turn lead to an increase in consumer misbehavior. First, we present a review of the literature on consumer misbehavior, as well as social media influence, especially among Gen Z. This is followed by our methodology and results. We will then discuss our findings followed by the conclusion and limitations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fullerton referred to consumer misbehavior as a pervasive issue directly resulting from the culture of consumption. Occasional consumer misbehavior is widespread particularly among younger consumers (Ray, 1984; Hagan et al., 1985). Continuous consumer misbehavior was found to be atypical, and some consumers never misbehave at all. However, it is thought that a few misbehaving consumers are responsible for a larger proportion of the instances of consumer misbehavior (Moschis, 1985; Bleakley, 1993). Those who engage in consumer misbehavior are thought to behave properly most of the time. Misbehaving consumers are diverse and difficult to typify based on demographic and socioeconomic factors (Jolson, 1974). Consumer misbehavior transcends class despite the commonly held belief that misbehavior is more pervasive among low income and low education individuals (Fullerton, 2004).

Fullerton posited seven motives for consumer misbehavior, which were established through studies in the following domains: the sociology of deviance, criminology, abnormal psychology, and other studies of consumer misbehavior (Pfohl, 1985; Terry and Steffensmeier, 1988; Vold and Bernard, 1986; Brain and Benton, 1981).

The first possible motive is unfulfilled aspirations. Merton (1968) affirmed that a discrepancy exists between widely held consumption goals and the availability of legitimate resources to attain them. Consumers who are unable to satisfy their consumption goals may refer to illicit means such as fraud or theft. This theory was reinforced by Durkheim's (1952) theory of Anomie as well as by Cameron (1964) and Brokaw (1993). The second possible motive for consumer misbehavior is deviant thrill-seeking. Lofland (1969) and Katz (1988b) both found that misbehavior may be motivated by thrill and adventure-seeking behavior, and the risk of being caught amplifies the rush that one obtains from misbehaving. In fact, lonely consumers were found to misbehave solely to add excitement to their lives (Moore, 1984).

The third possible motive for consumer misbehavior is the absence of moral constraints. If a consumer does not feel internal inhibitions towards misbehaving in a consumption setting, then the perceived norms and expectations do not have an impact that will deter him or her from misbehaving. Misbehaving consumers do not perceive their actions as immoral either from a general perspective or relating to their particular situation (Kallis and Vanier, 1985). Customers who perceive misbehavior as immoral are more able to restrain themselves from misbehaving.

The fourth possible motive for consumer misbehavior is differential association. Sutherland (1947) and Cohen (1966) described the sociology of deviance where a group in a society has norms that are deviant from those of the larger society. Misbehavior may be promoted within the norms of the group as members interact with one another. Sykes and Matza (1956) found that the group may even guide individuals to rationalize negative opinion towards the morality of their misbehavior. Furthermore, differential association has been found among teenagers who misbehave in consumption settings and potentially indicates a larger issue of deviant consumer socialization.

The fifth possible motive for consumer misbehavior is pathological socialization. It was found that consumers' often have more negative behavior towards larger companies than they do towards smaller

companies (Smigel, 1956; Baron and Fisher, 1984). Large businesses that are perceived as impersonal are more vulnerable to consumer misbehavior. The sixth possible motive for consumer misbehavior is provocative situational factors. Pertaining to physical spaces, consumers may misbehave towards marketers and/or other consumers in situations where harmony is reduced (Katz, 1988a). Examples of reductions in harmony may be excessive noise, heat, or crowding, as evidenced by raging passengers on crowded and delayed flights. Black Friday is a contemporary example of a hostile consumption environment that enables consumer misbehavior.

The final possible motive for consumer misbehavior is calculating opportunism. In a rational cost-benefit analysis, particularly where misbehavior is not deterred, consumers may feel validated in engaging in misbehavior. Crime theories offered by Becker (1968) and Wilson and Herrnstein (1985) state that misbehavior results from a calculation of expected costs and benefits. Consumer decision-making is found to have an identical rational process to misbehaving barring that misbehavior is unbounded by ethical concerns (Kraut, 1976). Often times, opportunities where the risk of getting caught is minimized, misbehaviors tend to be pursued. This perception of risk has been found to be the single most important reason for consumer behavior (Fullerton, 2004; Bernstein, 1985).

Since Fullerton's research, consumer misbehavior has become pervasive in online consumption exchanges. For example, one individual may purchase an e-book and then make copies for all of his/her friends (Gratz, 2011). Online consumer behavior is markedly different from in-person consumer behavior due to anonymity and interactivity. Consumers behavior is hidden and often disconnected from their real-life persona, allowing abusive practices to take place that are destructive to the company and other customers (Chen et al., 2014). Because of this, consumers may tend to justify their negative behaviors and don't perceive their behavior as wrong (Sigala, 2017; Dootson, Johnston, Lings & Beatson, 2018).

Along with an increase in online consumption exchanges, social media use has also increased. During this time, researchers have been discovering that there can be many negative effects of social media usage. Social media can cause social comparison which can lead to dissatisfaction with ourselves (Milkie, 1999; Dittmar, 2009; Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian & Halliwell, 2015). It can also cause more distractions, and lead to less overall happiness (Brooks, 2015). The social influence of social media can put pressure on consumers or create an expectation of certain behaviors. Consumers are more likely to behave badly if they see others behaving badly or are receiving negative word of mouth about a particular brand/organization (Chen, Yin & Liao, 2014). Consumers may also behave badly if they feel it is necessary in order to help them impress others or improve their social standing.

Specifically, while advertising can cause internal pressure, we posit that it is the peer influence that is impacting this pressure most. Researchers have found that while media can influence discussions of confidence, ideal selves and desires, peers are the primary driver of negative thoughts and behaviors (Clark & Tiggemann, 2006; Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012; Stice, Maxfield, & Wells, 2003). This influence guides our research questions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Does Generation Z feel pressured to have the latest products?
2. Does social media play a role in creating this feeling of being pressured to buy the latest products? If so, which platform(s) have the most influence?
3. What, if any consumer misbehaviors are Generation Z consumers engaging in and which misbehaviors do they find acceptable?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study was conducted at a large northeastern university in order to gather information on Generation Z consumers. Only undergraduates were studied since typically graduate students are millennials and not the subject of this investigation. The data was collected using a Qualtrics survey that was developed by modifying deviant behaviors from Fullerton's original work (2004) and added

questions pertaining to social media and online shopping. Participants were asked about their social influences, shopping pressures, what misbehaviors they engage in, and which they find acceptable.

Of the 481 respondents in the sample, 63% are female, 35% are male and 2% identify as other. All are between the ages of 18 and 24.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

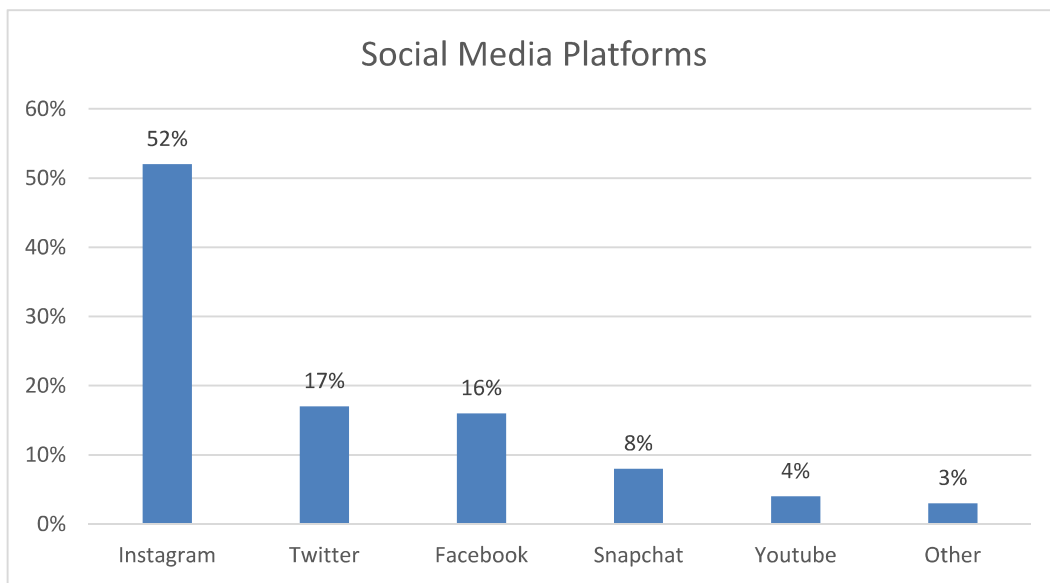
1. Does Generation Z feel pressured to have the latest products?

Respondents indicated feeling pressure to buy a range of products with 81% saying the latest technology was on the top of that list. Fifty-nine percent felt pressure to purchase popular concerts/sporting games/events, followed by the latest clothing (47%), latest video games (43%) and the latest beauty products (41%). The least amount of pressure felt was to purchase books (25%) and footwear (16%).

2. Does social media play a role in creating this feeling of being pressured to buy the latest products?

When asked to identify the primary source of pressure to buy the latest products, 50% of respondents indicated that social media was their channel of influence. When asked specifically which social media platforms were most influential, Instagram was specified as far more influential than others at 52%. Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat and YouTube (in that order) were also identified (See Figure 1). Other sources of pressure identified were family and friends (29%), print and broadcast media (14%), and external sources such as people at work (6%).

FIGURE 1
MOST INFLUENTIAL SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM



3. What, if any consumer misbehaviors are Generation Z's engaging in and which do they find acceptable?

Gen Z respondents report engaging in all 11 of the consumer misbehaviors studied and find all of the misbehaviors acceptable to some degree (See Table 1).

TABLE 1
ENGAGING IN MISBEHAVIORS AND ACCEPTABILITY

Consumer Misbehaviors	% who have engaged	% finding acceptable
Sign up for free trial subscriptions and cancel after trial ends.	81%	69%
Leave products in a random spot after you decided you were not going to buy them anymore	75%	31%
Create multiple email addresses for online coupons	51%	54%
Return used/worn items back to store	11%	25%
Take items without paying for them	11%*	3%
Try to convince employees that items that are not on sale were on sale rack	10%*	4%
Switch sale price tags onto regular priced items	9%	5%
Purchase a product online and returned it in store for more money	7%*	12%
Cut other shoppers in line at checkout	4%*	5%
Create or use counterfeit coupons	4%*	4%
Take merchandise from other shoppers' carts	3%	2%

*=Significant by gender

Signing up for a free trial and cancelling once the trial ends is the most common behavior with 81% of participants engaging in the behavior and 69% finding it acceptable. Creating multiple email addresses to get more coupons is also fairly common with more than half of participants using the con (51%) and finding that behavior acceptable (54%). Three-quarters of participants (75%) leave products randomly around a store instead of putting them back, despite only 31% finding that behavior acceptable. While only 11% admitted to returning used or worn items to a store, 25% of participants find that behavior acceptable.

Five of the misbehaviors are significantly different for males and females ($p < .05$) (See Table 2). Men were more likely to take items without paying for them, cut other shoppers in line at checkout, use counterfeit coupons and purchase something online and return it for more money. Women were more likely than men to try to convince an employee that something was on the sale rack when it was not.

TABLE 2
CONSUMER BEHAVIORS AND GENDER

	% of Males	% of Females
Take items w/o paying for them	6%	2%
Cut other shoppers in line at checkout	6%	2%
Create or use counterfeit coupons	5.5%	4%
Try to convince employees that items that are not on sale were on sale rack	9%	11%
Purchase a product online and returned it in store for more money	8.3%	7%

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to follow up on the early work on consumer misbehavior that culminated in 2004 with a comprehensive article by Fullerton that suggested possible motivations for consumer misbehavior and called for empirical research to help illuminate this dark side of the marketplace.

Our findings demonstrate that Generation Z consumers feel pressure from social media to have the latest products- especially the latest technology. The most pressure is coming from specific social media platforms, namely Instagram, but also Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat. These consumers were most likely to engage in specific misbehaviors including creating multiple email addresses to get samples/free products and leaving items in random places in a store after deciding not to purchase them. They viewed these as more acceptable, while behaviors like taking merchandise from other shoppers' carts and taking items without paying were less acceptable behaviors to Generation Z.

The most common behavior was signing up for a free trial and canceling before you have to begin to pay. This is an important behavior to note, as the pressure to have the latest technology, may drive them to have without paying. This might explain why many young people do not pay for their own Netflix and instead share passwords, or create multiple Spotify accounts in order to continue to get premium access for free during a trial. This has significant implications for technology companies as they offer free trials in the hopes use will be extended after the trial ends. This may not be a profitable strategy to use in order to target this generation. More research should be done in order to understand what marketing strategies lead to more adoption and less misbehavior.

In order to reduce the likelihood of Generation Z consumers engaging in misbehavior, it is important to reduce the pressures of social media. This is not an easy task and is an important avenue for future research. Instagram seems to be the dominant source for this pressure. Based on its highly visual nature, it is easy to see others on Instagram having things that you then want yourself. The impact of Instagram is obvious in an article from MarketingDive (Christe, 2019): Instagram is fast becoming a go-to channel for brands to push messages to consumers in-stream, and even shop. Instagram expanded its Shopping tool and unveiled Shoppable Instagram Stories last year. Last month, the social app launched in-app check out with 20 major brands including Nike and Adidas — two of the most popular brands among Gen Z. The Stories format, which counts 500 million users, has been important to Instagram's ad growth.

Numerous studies have found that Instagram and YouTube are the most popular platforms for Gen Z (Hodak, 2018; Green, 2019; Anderson & Jiang, 2018), however there was a significant difference between the influence of these platforms, with Instagram being far more influential. This points to not only advertising pressure but more importantly peer influence being a major driver of pressure to misbehave. YouTube lacks the visual connection with a peer group that Instagram allows. If peers are driving this negative influence, research on social pressures offline might need to be adapted for use online. Companies have tried to reduce consumer dependence on social media in general by tracking the amount of time spent on apps and allowing consumers to set time limits. Users should also be encouraged to engage in positive and realistic posts in order to encourage a sense of community and reduce pressures.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Consumers have long been prone to misbehavior given the right circumstances. The current research emphasizes a new cause of misbehavior, social pressure from social media. In this study, the Gen Z affinity for Instagram and other platforms contributes to the propensity to engage in consumer misbehavior. More research is needed on how exactly social media is causing this pressure and what can be done to reduce its influence. This study was done using only Generation Z consumers and should be expanded to include all consumers. As Generation Z is the largest user of social media, it would be interesting to learn if older consumers are less likely to be influenced by these pressures, and whether they view some of these behaviors as more unacceptable.

In the end, companies should encourage more inclusiveness, emphasize the importance of being unique and attempt to reduce the need to fit in, or be like everyone else. It is possible that these pressures can be reduced in order to lead to less consumer misbehavior among young consumers.

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