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Millennial and generation Z digital marketing communication and advertising effectiveness: A qualitative exploration

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ABSTRACT

Millennials are among the largest age cohorts in United States commanding the strong buying power. They are digital natives perplexing the marketing world to develop effective digital advertising strategies because they have become expert at avoiding digital advertising designed to influence their consumer behavior. Using a digital distraction during an advertisement is a Millennial behavior and they are not likely to read, listen to, or watch digital advertisements in their entirety. Marketers are challenged to uncover new insights relating to how to hold Millennial attention with digital marketing/advertising communication. This research explored questions on how marketers can better serve the Millennial consumer in the United States with digital marketing/advertising communication that is engaging, informative and influential to their consumer behavior. The research also explored similarities and differences in digital marketing/advertising engagement among Millennials and the Generation Z age cohort because Generation Z represents the largest age cohort coming of age. The research was conducted using the qualitative methods of focus groups, an online bulletin board and one-on-one in-depth interviews. The findings suggest that digital marketing/advertising that is short, with music, humor and the use of social media influencers has a positive impact on both age cohorts.

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Introduction

Age cohorts are analytical perspectives and determining the span of one generation to another is fluid. According to The Pew Research Center (2018b) Millennials are between the ages of 22 and 37 in 2018. Their numbers are larger in comparison to other age cohorts before them to include Generation X (ages 38 to 53 in 2018), Baby Boomers (ages 54 to 72 in 2018), the Silent Generation (ages 73–90 in 2018) and the Greatest Generation (ages 91 or above in 2018). The Pew Research Center (2018b) has called the generation after Millennials the Post-Millennial group whereas demographers have named this group Generation Z. Generation Z or GenZ has become a popular naming convention for this group recently (Fromm & Read, 2018). Generation Z members (ages 21 and under in 2018) are the largest age cohort in United States society today with 86.4 million members versus the next largest group of Millennials with 71.8 million members

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(Census, n.d.). Although Millennials are second to Generation Z in absolute population numbers, Millennials represent the largest age cohort in the work force (35%). The next largest groups that are in the work force are Generation X (33%), Baby Boomers (25%), Generation Z (5%) and The Silent/Greatest Generation combined (2%) (The Pew Research Center, 2018b).

With the largest numbers in the work force the estimated average household income for Millennials is 34,430 USD annually (Experian, n.d.). As such, the buying power of Millennials is estimated to be over 600 billion dollars according to Forbes (2017) and this trend in strong buying power is increasing. Since most of the Generation Z age cohort is not in the workforce and not independent of their parents/guardians, their buying power is predominately influential (Fromm & Read, 2018). Nevertheless, the buying power of Generation Z is estimated to be between 49 million to 148 million. As such, the economic factor of the robust buying power of Millennials and Generation Z age cohorts is a strong motivation for this research.

Another motivation to focus on the Millennial consumer in this research is because this age cohort has consumer behavior that is distinctive from the generations before them to include Generation X (ages 38 to 53 in 2018), Baby Boomers (ages 54 to 72 in 2018), the Silent Generation (ages 73–90 in 2018) and the Greatest Generation (ages 91 or above in 2018). Their distinctive behavior from other generations before them is driven by their use of technology. The rapid evolution of how people communicate and interact using technology is a generation-shaping consideration. Baby Boomers grew up as television expanded dramatically, changing their lifestyles and connection to the world in fundamental ways. Generation X grew up as the computer revolution was taking hold, and Millennials came of age during the internet explosion. They are digital natives. A digital native is an individual who was born after the widespread adoption of digital technology (Solomon, 2017). The term digital native doesn't refer to a generation but Millennials as an age cohort who were born during a time of this widespread adoption of digital technology are digital natives. They have grown up using technology such as the internet, computers, and mobile devices where this technology has been present for most if not all their lives. This exposure to technology in the early years is believed to give digital natives a greater familiarity and understanding of technology than people who were born before it was widespread (Nielsen, 2017). Generation Z are also digital natives where they have never known a world without the internet, computers, and mobile devices (Fromm & Read, 2018). As such, exploring their consumer behavior is another strong motivation for this research.

Interacting regularly with technology at a young age is the deciding factor to be a digital native. That said, Millennials and Generation Z are more likely to be familiar with the terminology of the digital world. This isn't to say they will intuitively understand computer programming or how a network transmits data. They will, however, be better placed to understand these technologies as they will have seen them in action many times. Digital natives interact with the world differently due to their early exposure to technology. As such, they have become accustomed to using technology to solve the repetitive tasks that form the basis of traditional learning and engagement in society (The Pew Research Center, 2018a). As digital natives, Millennials and Generation Z have been found to have a very short attention span for digital marketing communication and advertising (Nielsen, 2017). As such, marketers are fiercely competing for Millennial

mindshare and attention and the mindshare and attention of the Generation Z age cohort that is coming of age (Husain et al., 2016).

Marketers have been struggling to connect with the Millennial generation because many of the traditional methods of advertising have proven ineffective at capturing their full attention. Channel-surfing has traditionally demarcated distraction. However, few Millennials (less than 2% o) while watching TV changed the channel during commercials. Comparatively, older generations doubled and quadrupled that percentage. Though they didn't channel surf during commercials, Millennials scored low memorability rates for what they watched. This indicates a major shift in viewing patterns, and all signs point to mobile devices. Although 27% less of Millennials' time is spent watching traditional TV than those 35 years old and older, Nielsen (2017) reports that Millennials are still watching TV in the traditional sense but there is a shift. They're frequently and simultaneously tuned into TV-connected devices while watching traditional TV. As an example, Millennials' spend more time per person on Facebook Mobile and spend the second most time on Snapchat often while watching traditional TV or web surfing (The Pew Research Center, 2018a). This Millennial behavior defines distraction differently for this age cohort in contrast to the generations before them.

A study by Elite Daily (2015) provides additional insight into the behavior of Millennials as digital natives. The study confirmed that Millennials develop strong brand loyalty when presented with quality products and brands. However, they aren't influenced by advertising like the generations that came before them. Only 1% of the 1,300 Millennials surveyed by Elite Daily said that a compelling advertisement would make them trust a brand more. The study suggests that Millennials believe that advertising is all spin and not authentic. This finding may help to explain a common Millennial behavior. Specifically, according to Nielsen (2017), Millennials use more social media sites to view content created by social media personalities daily than those 35 years old and older. Millennials as digital natives grew up with product reviews and social tools to share opinions before committing to a purchase. Influencer marketing is a result of this word-of-mouth culture that values trusted endorsements. Social media is one way for customers to express brand loyalty, and it also provides an unofficial endorsement in the form of user-generated content (UGC) that can then be reposted and shared. This direct engagement invites the Millennial audience into a conversation while strengthening the relationship between consumer and brand. As such, Millennials are more likely to watch user generated content on social media where its perceived authenticity is valued. Marketers now more than ever must explore emerging media trends and attitudes among U.S. Millennials to uncover new insights about what kinds of new phenomena are on the horizon, especially as it relates to holding Millennial attention with digital marketing communication and advertising.

Like Millennials, Generation Z spends significant amounts of time on social media sites and video source platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook and YouTube searching for content that is engaging and entertaining (Nielsen, 2017). Digital marketers and advertisers are challenged to develop targeted campaigns to capture the attention of these digital natives that are upcoming influential spenders on products and brands. However, according to Advertising Age (Nielsen, 2017), 69% of Generation Z already avoid ads.

Problem statement and research questions

Holding Millennial attention and Generation Z attention with digital marketing communication and advertising is important because such communication provides a service to society. It serves a purpose to not only make the consumer aware of the value proposition of market offerings, it also serves to educate the consumer. A lack of engagement in digital marketing communication and advertising means that Millennials and Generation Z can miss important information that could enhance their well-being. Furthermore, this lack of digital marketing and advertising engagement presents an economic, financial implication for marketers and advertisers. Specifically, 2018 worldwide media and marketing spending is projected to be 1 trillion dollars (Advertising Age, 2018). A projected share of this spend in the United States is 38%. This amounts to billions of dollars. Most of this internet spending in the United States is on mobile platforms. Millennials and Generation Z as mentioned previously are the largest age cohorts in the United States and they are digital natives. Therefore, if marketers and advertisers fail to capture the attention of Millennials and Generation Z with digital marketing and advertising content, the return on investment of such expenditures in the billions of dollars is compromised.

Therefore, the primary question for this research study was: 1. How can marketers better serve the Millennial consumer with digital marketing communication and advertising that is engaging, informative and influential to their consumer behavior? The secondary research question was:

- (1) What are the characteristics of digital marketing communication and advertising that will hold Millennial attention and influence their consumer behavior?

Since Generation Z is projected to outpace Millennials in terms of population growth and buying power as they come of age, the research explored potential similarities and differences among this group in contrast with the Millennials. As such, third and fourth research questions were:

- (1) What are the characteristics of digital marketing communication and advertising that will hold Generation Z's attention and influence their consumer behavior?
- (2) Are there any notable differences between the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts in terms of advertising that will hold their attention and influence their consumer behavior?

Methodology

In this study the research questions were explored using qualitative research in the form of focus group research (Creswell, 2009), an online bulletin board (Seger, 1983) and one-on-one in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2009).

Selection criteria

Convenience/availability sampling (locating participants through the researcher's personal and professional network (Robson, 2002) was used to select participants for the study. The research analyzed the results of Millennial respondents in the United States (ages 22–37 in 2018) to obtain insights into the characteristics of digital marketing and advertising communication that would engage them. The research also analyzed results of Generation Z respondents in the United States (ages 21 and under 2018) to obtain insights into the characteristics of digital marketing and advertising communication that would engage them. The research was conducted among the oldest members of the Generation Z age cohort, ages 20 and 21-year olds since they are well into young adulthood. As the primary researcher, I thoroughly explained what the research was about, its potential benefits and any risks to the participant. I also took the time to allow participants to ask any questions or ask for clarification of anything that may not be understood.

Procedure

Consenting Millennial participants were interviewed in a focus group format face to-face. Millennial respondents were asked about their awareness and exposure to digital marketing communication and advertising. Respondents were asked to discuss the elements of the digital marketing communication and advertising that would encourage their engagement and influence their consumer behavior. In the online bulletin board phase of the research, Millennial respondents (the same participants in the focus group phase) were encouraged to explain further about the characteristics of digital marketing communication and advertising that captures and holds their attention, in addition to influencing their consumer behavior. Respondents were invited to participate in the platform with a unique secure login.

Qualitative research

Qualitative methods of research differ from quantitative methods in their means of inquiry. Qualitative methods seek to describe a phenomenon in a rich and holistic manner and to understand how people interpret their experiences (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Robson, 2002). Whereas, quantitative methods are more suited to reducing data to measurable variables that can be generalized to larger populations or statistically measuring cause and effect. One method of obtaining qualitative data is through the use of semi-structured interviews in focus groups. Focus group methodology is one of many qualitative approaches, including grounded theory, narrative theory, and communication theory. The grounded theory approach, in particular, guided the development of this research. The goal of grounded theory is to generate innovative and substantive theoretical frameworks that emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Most hypotheses are not a priori, but are rooted in the data, with themes and categories emerging throughout the course of data analysis. Grounded theorists seek to understand people's experiences in a rigorous and detailed manner to gain a deeper understanding of how the social phenomenon being studied operates (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). In line with the current study's goals, grounded theory was used to understand Millennial and

Generation Z marketing and advertising digital engagement. As part of the grounded theory process, the goal was to generate rich, detailed, and meaningful themes from discussions during the qualitative sessions. This is part of the process known as an inductive analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The inductive analysis consisted of generating themes from Millennial and Generation Z responses, developing conceptual categories, and then integrating the themes into a larger theoretical framework. Through the inductive process, the data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this study, focus groups and one-on-one interviews offered a method that allowed the discovery of Millennial and Generation Z perspectives on digital marketing communication and advertising engagement that were not yet in the literature. Identification of these perspectives was achieved by asking respondents to discuss aspects of digital marketing and advertising that captured their attention and influenced their consumer behavior in a meaningful way. Rather than responding to questions on a questionnaire or being observed in a laboratory setting, Millennials were encouraged to share their beliefs during an hour and a half long extended discussion within the focus groups whereas Generation Z respondents were encouraged to share their beliefs during an hour long one-on-one in-depth interview.

Focus groups

Focus groups were conducted among the Millennial age cohort to gain valuable information into their feelings about digital advertising and marketing communication. A focus group is a well-planned group discussion, led by a skilled moderator who creates as natural an environment as possible to get insights into the participants thinking (Mariampolski, 2008). In the focus group setting, different opinions and perspectives will emerge, all of which combine to paint a detailed picture for the questions surrounding digital marketing and advertising engagement among respondents.

Two focus groups with 15 participants each were conducted among Millennial respondents and moderated by the researcher. The following questions were posed to the groups:

- How often are you online?
- What online platforms do you use most often and why?
- Do you notice digital marketing communication and advertising while on these platforms?
- What aspects of digital advertising and marketing capture your attention and provide examples.
- Did the digital advertising and marketing capture your attention overall?

Following the focus groups, Millennials were asked to reflect further on their attitudes expressed during the focus group utilizing another qualitative technique; online bulletin boards.

Online bulletin boards

Online bulletin boards are a prototypical use of the computer as a medium, marrying the technological innovations of computer networking with the twin interests in communication: interpersonal conversation and mass propagation of messages (Seger, 1983). Technically, a combination of software and hardware resides on some host computer system, and users access it through terminals or microcomputers by connecting in over dedicated or general-purpose telecommunication lines. The online bulletin board messages and entire discussions are written by, and intended for, the users of the system. Different from electronic mail or teleconferencing, which are designed for a finite list of users or nodes, online bulletin boards are broadcast systems. Each message placed on them is intended for a wide audience of invited participants.

Online bulletin boards are highly involved discussions that unfold over extended time frames. With traditional face-to-face focus groups, participants are limited to specific timeframe and geographic areas. Online bulletin boards on the other hand can have consumers and observers participate from anywhere around the world. Online bulletin boards take advantage of threaded “Bulletin Board” technology where participants log in at times and from locations that are personally convenient, answering questions posted by the moderator while reading and responding to the other participants’ comments.

All of the discussion is visible onscreen to observers given access and participants. In this study the researcher served as moderator and was an observer to the participant discussions. As was the case for this project, an online bulletin board research project typically takes place over a 3-5-day period with respondents participating as many times as they feel is needed to express their ideas and opinions. Within the bulletin board, participants could embed video and other multimedia with the click of a button. Many participants used this capability to share their examples of digital advertising that captured their attention. This ability for participants to share media allowed the researcher to tap into the rich world of user-generated content (UGC) from participants.

One online bulletin board was conducted with Millennial respondents who participated in the focus group discussion. They were asked to further expand on any of the questions explored during the focus group phase. As such, the following questions were posed to the participants:

- How often are you online?
- What online platforms do you use most often and why?
- Do you notice digital marketing communication and advertising while on these platforms?
- What aspects of digital advertising and marketing capture your attention and provide examples.
- Did the digital marketing communication and advertising capture your attention overall?
- Post an example of digital marketing communication and advertising that captured your attention and explain the reasons why it captured your attention.

One-on-one in-depth interviews (IDIs)

One-on-one in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with 12 participants. These interviews were conducted with the Generation Z cohort because it was logistically feasible to collect the data within the required time constraints for the research field period. Specifically, when recruiting hard to reach individuals in a short time period, setting up IDIs is a better option than a focus group because the researcher only needs to accommodate one individual at a time. This facilitates respondent recruitment. As a methodology, IDIs do not provide less information because the researcher can elicit candid responses in a private setting regarding personal and/or professional topics of discussion in a shorter amount of time. Moreover, rapport with respondents and the quality of the information is not compromised because the researcher can devote complete attention to each research participant easily, listening actively. Compared with non-response that can sometimes occur among focus group members, there are relatively few unproductive IDIs because of the one-on-one interview approach. As a result, researchers only need about half as many respondents to accomplish the same objectives with this qualitative approach (Mariampolski, 2008) and this was achieved in this research.

Each one-on-one interview (IDI) was conducted and moderated by the researcher. The following questions were posed to the Generation Z participants:

- How often are you online?
- What online platforms do you use most often and why?
- Do you notice digital marketing communication and advertising while on these platforms?
- What aspects of digital advertising and marketing capture your attention and provide examples.

Generation Z respondents did not participate in a bulletin board because of feasibility issues as discussed but were asked to bring examples of digital advertising to the face to face interviews to discuss what captured their attention.

Data analysis

A key characteristic of qualitative data collection is to use the key issues that are identified in the discussions to refine questions and topical probes within the sessions. It is important to note that an interview/discussion guide was used in the focus group and one-on-one in-depth interviews and remained the same, but small changes were made such as refining a question or adding a probe, or by writing a note on the interview/discussion guide as a reminder for the next interview. In this way inductive inferences were made allowing the research to go deeper into the issues within the discussion. To use a metaphor, the data collection proceeded like a spiral. This spiral process continued until the research reached a saturation point, with no more new information emerging about the research topic. As such, the data analysis for this research was rooted in thematic analysis as a categorizing strategy for qualitative data generated by the focus groups, the online bulletin board and one-on-one in-depth interviews.

Thematic analysis is a process where the researcher reviewed the data, made notes, and sorted the data into categories (Boyatzis, 1998). As a data analytic strategy, a thematic analysis of the data helped the researcher move the analysis from a broad reading of the data towards discovering patterns and developing themes. Furthermore, with this approach to data analysis, a theme captured something important about the data in relation to the research question representing some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis is a flexible approach that can be used across a range of epistemologies and research questions. As such, this approach was appropriate for the study research questions. Since data analysis is a circular process, the analytic activities were conducted in a manner where tasks could be repeated (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Verbatim transcripts were used in the analysis, enabling the researcher to understand the views of study participants in their own words, interpret their meanings and form conclusions that are well rooted in the data. Data collection and analysis were interlinked. Some analytic tasks began during data collection. Analytic concepts were constructed inductively from data, not from deductive theories. Constant comparison was used throughout the analysis to define and refine concepts. Data analysis went further to develop themes in the data.

The analytic tasks of thematic analysis that were leveraged in this research were not conducted in a set order but were used flexibly in a process of discovery through the data. The process of thematic analysis may therefore be described as consisting of systematic, yet flexible for collecting and analyzing qualitative data. Although thematic analysis is not conducted in a firm step by step process, there were a series of tasks that comprised the data analysis. However, these were not applied in a particular order. As such, the process of thematic analysis guided the research and can be summarized in the following eight tasks:

- (1) Prepared verbatim transcripts: Working with the transcription service to transcribe the interviews for analysis;
- (2) Anonymized data: Personal identifying information for subjects will be undisclosed.
- (3) Became familiar with the data: Once verbatim interviews were transcribed, listened to and read the transcribed interviews repeatedly. During interviews analyzed the data by searching for themes and patterns.
- (4) Generated initial codes: Collated codes into potential themes, gathered all data relevant to each potential theme.
- (5) Searched for themes: Checking if the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set.
- (6) Reviewed themes: Conducted ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis told, clear definitions and names for each theme.
- (7) Defined and named themes: Conducted ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.

- (8) Produced the report: The final opportunity for analysis. Selected vivid, compelling extract examples, conducted a final analysis of selected extracts, relating it back to the research question and literature to produce a scholarly report of the analysis.

A major critique of thematic analysis is that it can yield a weak or unconvincing analysis, where the themes do not appear to work, where there is too much overlap between themes, or where the themes are not internally coherent and consistent (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This pitfall can occur if the researcher fails to adequately capture the majority of the data or fails to provide a rich description/interpretation of one or more aspects of the data. A weak or unconvincing thematic analysis can also stem from a failure to provide adequate examples from the data; for example, only one or two extracts for a theme. This critique is essentially about the important aspects of presentation, and the need for the analysis to be convincing to someone who has not read the researcher's entire data set: The "analysis" of the material is a deliberate and self-consciously artful creation by the researcher and must be constructed to persuade the reader of the plausibility of an argument. To avoid this analytical dilemma, all aspects of the theme should cohere around a central idea or concept. In so doing, the researcher can avoid the appearance of "anecdotalism" in qualitative research (Creswell, 2009). A critique of the method is that a researcher may use one or a few instances of a phenomenon that are reified into a pattern or theme, when it or they are actually idiosyncratic. This is not to say that a few instances cannot be of interest, or revealing, but that it is important not to misrepresent them as an overarching theme. For my research I did not feel that this was a concern because as a qualitative researcher, I viewed the information objectively.

Validity and reliability

Creswell (2009) advocated the importance of ensuring the reliability and validity of findings for qualitative research projects. Reliability is an examination of the stability and consistency of responses. To this end, reliability procedures were implemented for this research. This included checking transcripts against the recorded interviews for the focus groups and one-on-one interviews for obvious mistakes. Additionally, measures were taken to confirm that there were no drifts in definitions of codes and applications of them during the coding process with careful review of the data from the focus groups and online bulletin board.

Results

To this end, five distinct themes emerged from the research.

- (1) Millennial and Generation Z attention to digital marketing communication and advertising is more likely if it is short. Most respondents mentioned that the advertisement should make its point quickly. The most frequently mentioned duration was 15 seconds. Most felt that 30 seconds was too long to hold their attention.
- (2) Exposure to digital marketing communication and advertising that evokes emotion has the potential to capture Millennial and Generation Z attention. Most respondents reported that a digital advertisement that elicits an emotion is more

likely to motivate them to pay attention to it. Although many emotions were reported to have an impact on Millennial and Generation Z attentiveness to digital advertisements, humor appears to be very influential to their consumer behavior. Most respondents mentioned that a humorous ad will get their attention and would be more likely to be recalled.

- (3) Exposure to digital marketing communication and advertising using popular music has the potential to capture Millennial and Generation Z attention. Most respondents mentioned that even if they are multitasking, a digital advertisement with popular music will make them stop and look.
- (4) Millennial and Generation Z attention to digital marketing communication and advertising is more likely, if an admired and respected person conveys the message. Millennials and Generation Z were skeptical of the messages conveyed in any kind of advertising. However, most respondents mentioned that social media influencers are opinion leaders who are most likely to get their attention.
- (5) Millennial and Generation Z interpretation of digital marketing communication and advertising as relevant and authentic is more likely, if the message is conveyed by a person they admire and respect. Participants in this study reported that social media influencers convey a more believable message than other spokespersons for a brand such as celebrity endorsers (e.g., actors and athletes) in digital marketing communication and advertising. Digital marketing communication and advertising that is shared by the friends of Millennials and Generation Z is more likely to be perceived as relevant and authentic as well.

The following quotes from the online bulletin board are illustrative of the themes discovered in this research among Millennials:

“The length of ads is important for the Millennials, we do not have patience to see the whole ad. If the length of the ads must be 30 seconds, the first few seconds should be attractive or with popular music so that Millennials will want to watch the whole ad. If the length of the ads can be around 15 seconds, maybe more Millennials will want to see it in full. Using social media is a smart way to have more attention from Millennials due to the fact that Millennials have kind a kind of “social media addiction”. They (we) cannot live without social media. Also, we tend to follow what social media influencers say and respect their opinion.

“Length of the ad:15 seconds or less than 5 seconds or people can skip the long ads after 5 seconds if they are not interested in it. User Content by Social Media Influencers is really important, less and less consumers trust what ads say, they have too many choices, we (Millennials) are loving to choose what influencers say and it’s even better that the influencers are using the products. Good music is also important, like music in the billboard 100 are good choices. And humor should be the best emotion to evoke”.

“In my opinion, the length of the ad is significant for Millennials because the pace of our life becomes quicker and quicker all the time, people do not spend their time watching ads, so the length of the ad is important, and it better be no more than 30 seconds. Less would be good. For user content by social media influencers, it is also important to have this with an ad,

social media influencers have an impact on Millennials since they are on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, they attract our attention because we so often pay attention to the social media. And how about popular music for digital ads, most of millennials like to listen to some music, so popular music is a good method to attract Millennials' attention. And the last is content delivered to evoke emotion, I think when ads have a content delivered to evoke emotion, it will be an interesting ad to attract Millennials to watch the ad.

I want to share the ad – “Smell Like A Man”, “Smell Like A Man” is a successful advertisement for P&G's Old Spice. The actor is a man with six-pack abs even though he is not a social media influencer he grabs your attention. The slogan is “Hello ladies, look at your man, now back to me, now back at your man, now back to me, sadly, he isn't me”. I think it is successful because the target audience for this ad is very special, the ad targets female viewers, despite the product's target market being male, as the company determined that women frequently make purchasing decisions with respect to personal care products even for male household members. The agency's Old Spice planner and account team had figured out that women were making the majority of body wash purchases. They realized a lot of men were just using their wife or girlfriend's body wash and this really wasn't good for Old Spice sales. The ad was funny and short and attracted my attention even though it might make my girlfriend go shopping for the brand and I hope she does. I shared this ad with friends because I liked it so much”.

The following quotes from the one-on-one in-depth interviews (IDIs) are illustrative of the themes discovered in this research among Generation Z:

“Comedic or innovative ideas capture my eye in terms of digital ads.”

“Ads tailored to personal interest from people I follow online”

“Videos work with digital ads, but they shouldn't be too long. One ad for Purple Mattresses was 4 minutes but since it was catchy, and they did a very good job at getting the consumer in. But usually I don't look at an ad if it's too long. Catchy colors work too; a bold statement is something that catches my eye and if it is funny.”

“The Dorito's ad campaigns are always funny and get me to watch”

“The digital ads have to be quick.”

“Here is the purple mattress commercial that I saw when online as well as when I was watching other YouTube videos. Was it long? Yes, but what caught my attention was the actress and the very real testing of the product. It made me laugh. At some point I want to get this mattress because there is real evidence of its quality shown in the video. I ended up researching the company and I plan on buying one in the future. I shared this one with friends probably looking for mattress since moving back to school is happening soon.”

“I won't block the ad if it has music that I like, I listen to the end because of the song.”

“Yes, Certain vloggers will make me stop and listen then I find they are advertising something. Since they are talking about it, I listen.”

“Music artists, mostly from Instagram are interesting to me, I check out what they are saying and doing. I would say they get my interest.”

Discussion

The goal of this study was to analyze qualitatively how marketers can better serve the Millennial consumer with digital marketing communication and advertising that is engaging, informative and influential to their consumer behavior. The research also explored if there were any differences or similarities among the Generation Z age cohort in contrast to Millennials. Digital marketing spend in the United States will near 120 USD billion by 2021. Investment in paid search, display advertising, social media advertising, online video advertising and email marketing will pace to 46% of all advertising in five years (Forbes, 2017). As such, Millennial buying power will drive increased spend and as will the increasing buying power of Generation Z as the come of age.

Millennials, as one of the largest living generation with the strong buying power as a group (The Pew Research Center, 2018b), are digital natives in a life stage where they are building their lives. They are starting careers, establishing homes, and creating families. This puts them in a high spending time in their lives. Marketers will grow their digital investments to reach them in an effort to influence their consumer behavior towards purchase of their offerings. As such, marketers now more than ever have an opportunity to better serve the Millennial consumer with digital marketing communication and advertising that is engaging, informative and influential to their consumer behavior. However, this is not an easy task since the Millennial consumer is a distracted multitasker where the efforts of digital marketers face obstacles to get the attention of this consumer (Nielsen, 2017). Therefore, marketers have the chance to understand what choices Millennials make when they decide to engage with digital marketing communication and advertising in addition to understanding the compelling characteristics of this communication.

The Generation Z age cohort are also digital natives that are distracted multitaskers. Digital marketers face similar challenges with this age cohort as well to capture their attention with digital advertising and marketing communication (Nielsen, 2017). As such, the research demonstrated matching challenges for each generation. The qualitative findings of this study address the research questions posed and provide insights from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

Theoretical and practical implications

Since the Millennial and Generation Z consumer are distracted multitaskers in terms of their digital behavior, a marketing challenge is to capture their attention with their digital marketing communication and advertising. Perception theory which is a process where consumers translate raw stimuli into meaning (Solomon, 2017), provides a framework for this marketing challenge. From a consumer behavior perspective, there are numerous definitions in literature explaining perception. One such definition is particularly insightful where it states that perception refers to the entire process by which an individual becomes aware of the environment and interprets it so that it will fit into his or her frame of reference (Walters & Bergiel, 1989, p. 333). A person's frame of reference consists of all his past experiences, beliefs, likes, dislikes, prejudices, feelings, and other psychological reactions of unknown origin. A consumer's brain attempts to make sense out of the stimuli to which it is exposed.

There are three sequential factors that encompass the consumer perception process (Solomon, 2017). Exposure is the first step and involves the extent a consumer encounters a stimulus. For example, we are exposed to numerous commercial messages while surfing the internet or browsing through social media. Most of this exposure is random where consumers do not seek out the stimuli. However, if a consumer is actively shopping for a product, a new dress for an event as an example, the consumer may actively seek out advertisements for dresses and notice when a retailer's advertisements comes up on a social media site they are on.

Exposure is not enough to significantly impact an individual consumer. Moreover, exposure will not have an impact based on a single trial (certain advertisements, or commercial exposures such as the golden arches from McDonalds, are based on extensive repetition rather than much conscious attention). In order for stimuli to be consciously processed, attention is needed. As such, attention as the second step in the sequence is a matter of degree. A consumer's attention may be high when reading suggestions online. As an example, to save money for a great vacation attention may be high when exposed to an advertisement on the topic but low when an advertisement for a product that does not interest the consumer comes up while the consumer is streaming a favorite movie or when watching a television program. Nevertheless, even when attention is low, it may be instantly raised if, for example, an advertisement for a product in which the consumer is interested in comes on. Several factors influence the extent to which stimuli will be noticed and attended to. One obvious issue is relevance. Consumers, when they have a choice, are more likely to attend to pleasant stimuli but when the consumer can't escape, very unpleasant stimuli are also likely to get attention. One of the most important factors in terms of getting a consumer's attention, however, is repetition. Specifically, consumers often do not give much attention to an advertisement on a low priority item at any one time, but if it is seen repeatedly, the cumulative impact will be greater.

Attention to stimuli is heightened with greater contrast (difference between the stimulus and its surroundings) as well as greater prominence (e.g., greater size, center placement). Weber's Law (Todorovic, 1997), helps to explain this phenomenon where it suggests that a consumers' ability to detect changes in stimulus intensity appear to be strongly related to the intensity of that stimulus to begin with. Moreover, Weber's Law demonstrates that the stronger the initial stimulus, the greater the change must be for it to be noticed. As an example, most retailers believe that a price discount must be at least 20% for consumers to notice or to react to it (Solomon, 2017).

In perception theory, interpretation, the third step in the sequence, involves making sense out of the stimulus. For example, when a consumer sees a blue toothpaste box, it may be interpreted as the Crest Glamorous White brand instead of Colgate's Optic White toothpaste brand where the trade color for the brand is red. Interpretation also refers to the meaning that we assign to sensory stimuli. Two consumers can see the same event, but their interpretation can be completely different. Consumers assign meaning to stimuli based on the schema, a set of beliefs, to which the stimulus is assigned. Priming is a process where certain properties of a stimulus evoke a schema that leads the consumer to evaluate the stimulus in terms of other stimuli encountered that are believed to be similar. Identifying and evoking the correct schema is crucial to consumer behavior, because this determines what criteria will be used to evaluate the product, package, an

ultimately the digital marketing communication and advertising exposed to the consumer. These principles are based on Gestalt psychology where meaning is derived from the totality of a set of stimuli (Todorović, 2007).

Perception theory helps to explain the findings in this research in terms of the characteristics of digital marketing communication and advertising that has the potential to effectively capture the attention of the Millennial and Generation Z consumer to the point where it has a chance to influence their behavior. This research also adds to the literature on Millennial and Generation Z consumer behavior as distracted digital natives in terms of the characteristics of digital marketing communication and advertising that will not only hold their attention but will also be interpreted authentically. As such, the themes developed in this research also provide direction from a practical stand point. Specifically, from a practical standpoint, the themes from this research provide guidance on a qualitative level on how to hold the attention of Millennial and Generation Z age cohorts when exposed to digital marketing and advertising stimuli. Moreover, the themes from this research provide guidance on a qualitative level on how marketers can effectively guide Millennial and Generation Z interpretation of the digital stimuli that will be relevant to them, perceived as authentic and influential to their consumer behavior.

Theme 1 indicates: Millennial and Generation Z attention to digital marketing communication and advertising is more likely if it is short. As such, digital marketing and advertising that is short duration are well documented as effective in the literature for Millennials (Advertising Age, 2018) and this research extends this finding qualitatively to Generation Z age cohorts. Theme 2 indicates: Exposure to digital marketing communication and advertising that evokes emotion has the potential to capture Millennial and Generation Z attention. Among Millennials and Generation Z respondents, humor was mentioned often as effective in holding their attention to a digital marketing and advertising. The effectiveness of humor in advertising humor is well documented where humorous advertisements may be attention getting because they provide a source of distraction (Katherine, 2012). A funny ad inhibits counterarguing (in which a consumer thinks of reasons why he or she doesn't agree with the message); this increases the likelihood of message acceptance because the consumer doesn't come up with arguments against the product. (Solomon, 2017). This finding can be extended qualitatively to both the Millennial and Generation Z age cohorts where from a qualitative standpoint the research suggests that humor has the potential to be an effective component digital marketing communication and advertising for these age cohorts.

Theme 3 indicates: Exposure to digital marketing communication and advertising using popular music has the potential to capture Millennial and Generation Z attention. The advertising literature indicates that the use of the familiarity of a popular song can incite a specific reaction in viewers that aligns with the objective of their ad. Powerful songs can capture consumer attention and invoke strong emotional responses, and songs can help create a soundtrack to the events unfolding in an advertisement when lyrics are integrated into the voice over and storyline (Faseeh & Mohammad, 2018). The significance of using music in advertising can be extended to both the Millennial and Generation Z age cohorts where from a qualitative standpoint the research suggests that music and popular music, has the potential to be an effective component of digital marketing communication and advertising for these groups.

Theme 4 indicates: Millennial and Generation Z attention to digital marketing communication and advertising is more likely, if an admired and respected person conveys the message. Moreover, Theme 5 indicates: Millennial and Generation Z interpretation of digital marketing communication and advertising as relevant and authentic is more likely, if the message is conveyed by a person they admire and respect. People who are admired and respected are described in the research as people that Millennials and Generation Z follow online (social media influencers) and their own friends. These themes contribute to the literature qualitatively as important input to guide creative development of effective targeted digital marketing and advertising communication to Millennials and Generation Z (Pileliene & Grigaliunaite, 2017). There are practical implications for marketers and advertisers on how to leverage social media influencers.

To develop digital marketing and advertising that Millennials and Generation Z cohorts will effectively perceive requires several considerations. Specifically, marketers will determine what influencer qualities will make a partnership with their brand feel genuine. Developing and managing a relationship with influencers can be time-consuming and sometimes complicated work. Marketers that lack the resources to carry out an influencer program should consider partnering with an outside firm that already has the necessary relationships and technology.

As such, there are several practical considerations for marketers to identify social media influencers as a part of their digital marketing and advertising efforts. First, marketer can identify influencers with expertise in topics relevant to the marketer's product category; second, marketers can note which social media platforms the influencers use and how far their reach extends in terms of their followers and demographics of their followers; third, the persona of the social media influencer must be examined to determine if it aligns with the marketer's brand voice, message, and goals (Lazazzera, 2018).

An alternate approach given objectives and resource constraints can also be considered. Specifically, when marketers are trying to identify social media influencers for a campaign, they can examine the psychographics in addition to the demographics of the Millennial and Generation Z age cohorts. Specifically, marketers can examine through market research who is inspiring the Millennial and Generation Z consumer to include what they care about (Holmes, 2013). With this perspective in mind, identifying social media influencers that matter most can be uncovered to better target the Millennial and Generation Z age cohort.

The size of an influencer's audience is important but is not the only factor marketers should take into consideration when trying to identify an effective social media influencer to represent their brand. Marketers also need to look at the kinds of comments influencers get on their posts to ascertain the tone and quality of that engagement-with an eye on whether the activity is from real people and whether social media influencers are creating content that is valuable to the Millennial and Generation Z age cohort that also aligns with the values of the marketer's brand and company.

Once Millennial and Generation Z preferences have been addressed, the nature of the relationship between the social media influencer and the company needs to be determined. There are two unique types of relationships between companies and their social media influencers: paid and unpaid. The paid relationship involves a "formal partnership" where the company pays social media influencers to include the company's products in their content, for example. The unpaid relationship, by contrast, would

involve offering an influencer early access to a product, service, or experience so that the social media influencer will be motivated to include the company in their content. It is essential for the marketer to address the transparency of the relationship to the social media influencer so that authenticity is not compromised. This is important because authenticity is a Millennial and Generation Z value. Authenticity also relates to the effective attention and interpretation of digital marketing and advertising.

Limitations and delimitations

As with all research, this study is subject to limitations and delimitations. The qualitative research design used in this study seeks to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively precise and absolute measures (Creswell, 2009). By reason of the size number of participants, the special recruitment methods employed, and the study objectives themselves, it is clearly understood that the work in this study is exploratory in nature. The findings must be seen, therefore, as hypotheses for future research. The findings are not, nor were they ever intended to be, projectable to any larger population. They were developed for qualitative insight and should be viewed in a qualitative rather than a quantitative frame of reference. As with any qualitative study, especially when utilized for marketing applications, caution must be exercised in generalizing the findings (Mariampolski, 2008). However, there is much value in qualitative inquiry. This is because insights can be garnered from hearing the voices of participants in a qualitative setting that would not be heard as intimately in a quantitative method of data collection. Furthermore, there is a benefit of researching concepts and/or phenomena more deeply because it facilitates more depth and critical thinking. In qualitative studies, the research participant can tell his or her own story and create meaning-making that can be intrinsically beneficial. As such, words and categories of participants lend themselves to exploring how and why phenomena occur in a more naturalistic setting in terms of relational conversation where findings are in the respondent's own words and lived experiences. This is not necessarily generalizable yet can be representative, stimulating and can help inform follow up quantitative inquiries (i.e., studying something more deeply qualitatively before setting up quantitative assessment).

Another limitation of the research is that the Generation Z member interviewed were the oldest of this group (ages 20 and 21). Future research would explore a wider age range to include teens that are coming of age as independent consumers.

Several characteristics of effective digital marketing communication and advertising emerged from this research. Future research will use quantitative methods to assess which characteristics of this stimuli contribute most to Millennial and Generation Z perception of digital marketing communication and advertising. Moreover, future research will quantify what combination of these characteristics will be the most influential to Millennial and Generation Z consumer behavior. The data collection and analysis will be accomplished using conjoint analysis among an availability sample of Millennial and Generation Z consumers in the United States.

Conjoint Analysis is a quantitative research technique. It is executed using a descriptive research design and is based on statistical analysis using data captured in a survey. This methodology helps determine how consumers value different attributes. It is used to measure preferences for product or service features, to learn how the optimal

changes to some attributes of a product affect demand. In this case the product would be the digital stimuli. Conjoint analysis is used to forecast the likely acceptance of a product, if brought to market. Rather than directly ask survey respondents what they prefer in a product, or what attributes they find most important, conjoint analysis employs the more realistic context of asking respondents to evaluate potential product profiles. Each profile includes multiple conjoined product features (hence, conjoint analysis). The application of conjoint analysis for future research would have the goal of determining the optimal combination of digital marketing communication and advertising characteristics that would effectively engage Millennial and Generation Z consumers. Conjoint (trade-off) analysis is one of the most widely used quantitative methods in Marketing Research (American Marketing Association, 1992).

Conclusions

Millennials and Generation Z as consumers have distinctive behavior that presents challenges to marketers and advertisers. They are digital natives who multitask while online. As such, their online behavior is distracted, compromising the effectiveness of targeted digital marketing communication and advertising. This study provides direction on how marketers and advertisers can better serve the Millennial and Generation Z consumers with digital marketing communication and advertising that is engaging, informative and influential to their consumer behavior. This study qualitatively suggests that there are characteristics of digital marketing communication and advertising that have the potential to improve Millennial and Generation Z engagement with such stimuli. The impact of popular music and humor were found to encourage greater attention. Moreover, from a directional perspective digital marketing and advertising communication that is short (less than 30 seconds) with messaging conveyed by a social media influencer has the potential to better hold Millennial and Generation Z attention for its duration. Furthermore, the research suggests that messaging delivered by social media influencers and shared with them by friends is perceived to be more relevant to the Millennial and Generation Z consumer. In addition, from a qualitative perspective digital marketing and advertising with these characteristics is perceived as more authentic in comparison to digital marketing communication and advertising without social media influencers or such stimuli not shared with them by friends.

The literature on perception theory helps to explain the importance of social media influencers in creating more effective digital marketing communication and advertising for the Millennial and Generation Z consumer. The research suggests from a qualitative standpoint that social media influencers evoke priming thus activating a schema within the Millennial and Generation Z mind (Tang et al., 2017). This activation of the schema enables ambiguous or new information in the digital advertisement to be organized and interpreted in this consumer's mind more effectively (Daugherty et al., 2018). It can be hypothesized that since a Millennial consumer may be following a social media influencer before advertising exposure, the influencer may be more likely to initiate the priming effect and schematic activation. As such, the research suggests directionally that social media influencers can help the distracted Millennial and Generation Z consumer better attend to digital advertising stimuli. In addition, qualitatively, the social media influencer may help the Millennial and Generation Z mind better establish

a framework for understanding new information in the advertising helping it to be perceived as relevant and authentic. The research also suggests from a qualitative view that a similar priming effect takes place when digital marketing communication and advertising is shared by Millennial and Generation Z social media connections (i.e., friends and followers).

In conclusion, the qualitative results from this study suggest that marketers and advertisers may have the opportunity to create more effective Millennial and Generation Z targeted digital marketing communication and advertising by developing shorter executions utilizing popular music and humor where a well-researched social media influencer conveys the message. The results did not reveal dramatic differences qualitatively between the two age cohorts.

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