

Who are the Centennials:

Marketing Implications of Social Media Use and Preferences

*Sue Y. McGorry, M.B.A., PhD., sue.mcgorry@desales.edu

Megan R. McGorry

Abstract

Although marketers continue to study Millennials in an attempt to understand their buying behavior and prowess, a new demographic has surfaced that may significantly impact how organizations will communicate and sell to young individuals: enter the Centennials.

Centennials are those born at the turn of the century from approximately 1997 to 2015. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, this age group of population accounts for almost 26% of the population in America (Vespa, 2017). This generation may be called Gen Z, iGen, Founders, or Centennials. Although data and demographics are beginning to emerge about this group, scholarly research regarding this demographic and its use of social media is sparse. Are Centennials different from Millennials? How do they use social media? Will social media be an important tool for communication with this demographic? We explore these questions in this study and discuss future implications based upon primary survey results.

Why are the Centennials worth paying attention to? This group easily contributes \$44 billion to the American economy, and by 2020, they will account for one-third of the U.S. population (Vespa, 2017). Unlike Millennials, these young folks are concerned about their future. Seventy percent of them are worried that they may not be prepared for the future; they are less idealistic and much more pragmatic than their predecessors the Millennials. In fact, some researchers have found that Centennials (or GenZers) behave more like the Baby Boomer generation (Lenhart, 2015; Moore, 2012). This may have additional implications for social media use and thus how marketers may use these tools to communicate information to this generation.

The Centennials are “hyper” connected on social media (Fromm, 2016; Jacobsen and Forste, 2011). These individuals may forego typical social situations because they are so completely connected to friends via social media. These individuals, unlike the Millennials, have grown up with smartphones in their hands. Many of them not only use the phones for social purposes, they are also encouraged to use them as learning tools in school. They are constantly connected and have never been able to not “google” a topic (Villanti et al, 2017).

This demographic is also a frequent user of what is known as “dark social” (Fromm, 2016). Dark social refers to private messaging apps. While Millennials began to move away from dark social and on to more public platforms, the centennials are attempting to find ways to privatize their relationships. They may be more likely to use apps such as SnapChat and YikYak because this media enables them to be more selective about their audiences (Vallone, 2016; Magee, 2013; Agosto, 2012).

Do Centennials prefer one type of social media versus another? Why? What are the implications of Centennials’ social media use and preferences? Are there differences by age and gender? What do marketers need to know and how might this info be useful? Although some demographic research has been reported in industry, these topics have not been explored in detail in scholarly research (Villanti et al, 2017; Laranjo et al, 2015; Struik and Baskerville, 2014; Chou, 2009). We explore these and other issues in this study.

We conducted a survey with 238 teens from 11-20 years of age. The survey was delivered in two modes: electronically and in person at two school events. We asked students questions about their social media preferences, why they use social media and what type of social media they may be most likely to use to find out information about new products in addition to some other issues related to social media use. The students are from a suburban area 90 minutes outside of New York City and Philadelphia. Household median income is \$61,840.

Briefly, students were asked about SnapChat, Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter and “other” forms of social

media. Respondents indicate that SnapChat and Instagram are their preferred social media tools of choice. Most frequently, the Centennials are using these most preferred tools to keep in touch with friends and entertain themselves. When respondents were asked to rank social media tools in terms of their use, YouTube, SnapChat and Instagram emerge as top preferences. While the audience equally uses YouTube, SnapChat and Instagram for general socialization on social media, there is a clear preference of YouTube for new product and services info. It is also interesting to note that preferences vary by age. While the younger teens (13 or younger) prefer Instagram, the older teens are more likely to use YouTube and SnapChat. Interestingly, there are no significant differences between males and females and their use of social media with the exception of using the tools to find information about new products and services. It appears that females are more likely to use SnapChat in order to learn about products and services.

What implications does this have for marketers and future research? First, video may be critical with this demographic. Both SnapChat and Instagram use video in some format to communicate. The videos are brief, which means if marketers were to use either of these tools, the most important information for these consumers must be communicated in a short period of time.

This leads directly to the next inference: word of mouth via social will be crucial as well. Both of these tools enable users to selectively share information in video format. Marketers must keep in mind both direct and indirect audiences in communicating information about products and services. If users choose to share information conveyed via SnapChat or Instagram with other users, the video must be briefly explanatory for new product users.

Due to the nature of these tools, and the fact that users indicated they are using the tools to entertain themselves, marketers must create content that is delivered in an entertaining and informative (infomercial style) format. This could be a challenge given that it will be imperative to also convey product information.

This is exploratory research on the Centennial demographic. As such, additional primary research must be conducted to explore this demographic and their use of social media. Future research should include more detailed study of this demographic and their preferences for social media tools relative to products and services and acquiring information. There may also be implications for the type of information to be shared and the method by which it's communicated via the specific social media tools identified in this study.

References

- Agosto, D. E., Abbas, J., & Naughton, R. (2012). Relationships and social rules: Teens' social network and other ICT Selection Practices. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science & Technology*, 63 (6), 1108–1124.
- Chou, W. Y. S., Hunt, Y. M., Beckjord, E. B., Moser, R. P., & Hesse, B. W. (2009). Social media use in the United States: implications for health communication. *Journal of medical Internet research*, 11(4), e48.
- Fromm, J. (2016). *What Marketers Need To Know About Social Media And Gen Z* Forbes December. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jefffromm/2016/12/19/what-marketers-need-to-know-about-social-media-and-gen-z/print/>
- Jacobsen, W. and Forste, R. (2011). The wired generation: Academic and social outcomes of electronic media use among university students. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*. May, 14(5): 275-280.
- Laranjo L, Arguel A, Neves AL, Gallagher AM, Kaplan R, Mortimer N, et al. (2015). The influence of social networking sites on health behavior change: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *J Am Med Inform Assoc*. Jan; 22(1):243-256.

- Lenhart, Amanda (2015). Teens Social Media and Technology Overview Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/>
- Magee, R., Agosto, D., Forte, A., Ahn, J., Dickard, M., & Reynolds, R. (2013). Teens and social media: Where are we now, where next?. *Proceedings Of The American Society For Information Science And Technology*, 50(1), 1-4.
- Moore, Marguerite. (2012). Interactive media usage among millennial consumers. *The Journal of Consumer Marketing*; Santa Barbara 29(6): 436-444.
- Struik LL, and Baskerville N. (2014). The role of Facebook in crush thecrave, a mobile- and social media-based smoking cessation intervention: qualitative framework analysis of posts. *J Med Internet Res*. 16(7):e170
- Vallone, D., Smith, A., Kenney, T., Greenberg, M., Hair, E., Cantrell, J., & Koval, R. (2016). Agents of Social Change: A Model for Targeting And Engaging Generation Z across Platforms. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 56(4), 414-425.
- Vespa, J. (2017). The Changing Economics and Demographics of Young Adulthood: 1975–2016. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2017/demo/p20-579.pdf>
- Villanti AC, Johnson AL, Ilakkuvan V, Jacobs MA, Graham AL, Rath JM (2017). Social Media Use and Access to Digital Technology in US Young Adults in 2016. *J Med Internet Res*. 19(6):e196

Keywords: *social media, Centennials, consumer behavior*

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and Practitioners: This exploratory research offers insights concerning social media usage among the Centennial demographic.

Author Information:

Sue McGorry is a Professor of Business at DeSales University.

TRACK: Internet/Social Media Marketing