Cracking The Social Media Code of Post-Millennials

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CRACKING THE SOCIAL MEDIA CODE OF POST-MILLENNIALS

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ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Cracking The Social Media Code of Post-Millennials

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This project will investigate the way that generation z/post millennials interact and respond to digital marketing and social media. The final deliverable is a 30-minute webinar offering a wide assessment of this up and coming generation. The video will include a comparison between how advertising is currently conducted for millennials and how it will need to change their successors. The webinar will also include research, examples of successful marketing to this generation, and practical application tips.

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Introduction

Learning how to communicate with different demographic groups is a vital skill in being an excellent social media and digital marketing professionals. The mysterious landscape of the Internet can seem impossible to navigate for those who are not influencers and change makers, but research and data can provide helpful tricks to participating in a meaningful way. A key is needed to understand each segment of the bigger picture. My project seeks to offer an expansive view of what today's digital marketers and communicators must take into consideration when targeting one segment of the bigger picture, the post millennial generation.

My research, spanning 2016-2019, is compiled into a seminar, which can be presented at high schools, universities, and businesses looking to target or relate to the unique post millennial audience. This video seminar offers a background on this generation, their unique characteristics, successful examples of targeted content, and conclude with some practical application tools. The seminar lasts 30 minutes, and explains the best way to communicate with the emerging post millennial generation as purchase makers. The webinar will include research, examples of successful marketing to this generation, and practical application tips.

As someone with an interest in both sociology and marketing techniques, I selected this research topic because this industry requires continual analysis of cultural trends. Therefore, as a professional in the marketing field, my goal is to be proactive in researching and planning ahead for ways to effective communicate with my current demographics, as well as the ones coming soon. Adaptation is the only way to remain a valuable contributor to an overly crowded field. The disconnects between generations offer an interesting array of options for strategy and communication. A guidebook, so to speak, for the up and coming generation is beneficial for

more than people strictly within the marketing industry. Understanding each new generation can ease tensions and create inter-generational communities that have not existed until this point.

Literature Review

Research is finally starting to catch up to the millennial generation, but their predecessors are quickly aging up to become a key demographic for content creators to get to know. It is important for marketing professionals to anticipate the needs of this rapidly growing generation to plan for the future, in addition to marketing to current generations. The post-millennial generation, also referred to as Generation Z, is already beginning to enter college and high school. Now is the time to get ahead in regards to studying and researching their following generation.

This project will seek to offer an expansive view of what today's digital marketer must take into consideration when targeting the post millennial generation, also referred to as Generation Z. This demographic already makes up, "25.9% of the United States population, the largest percentage, and contribute $44 billion to the American economy. By 2020, they will account for one-third of the American population" (Beall). Members of Gen Z are those aging between 6 to 21 years of age in 2018 according to the Pew Research Center (Fry & Parker).

Post-millennials are value-conscious due to their experiences growing up during and in the wake of the recession. Millennials tend to focus on discounts and sales more consistently than their predecessors, but value is important to both groups. "Sixty-seven percent of millennials surveyed said that they would go to the website to get a coupon, whereas only 46% of Gen Z polled said they would do the same (Beall).

Facebook is still the most used social media platform among U.S. adults at 68%, but Instagram has been rapidly growing its usage percentage to 28%, up 4% over last year (Pew Research). The way that Facebook and other social media platforms are used by Gen Z is based on function. Their usage is segmented to platforms for specific purposes rather than using all possible avenues of each.

For example, "Facebook is not a channel for sharing but rather an informational hub. Snapchat, by contrast, is the real-life platform, where teens share what they're up to privately with select friend groups. Instagram, meanwhile is the aspirational platform, where teens post only carefully groomed imagery of themselves" (Fromm).

Generation Z crave the perception of authenticity from brands so they themselves can use those brands to create their own unique personal brand. Studies show that up to 92% of this new generation has a digital footprint, so standing out is really important. Some theorize that this drive for uniqueness derives from the "connections" that this group forms with brands and celebrities through social media (Beall). Brands like SunnyD are tapping into that concept by rebranding with fresh concepts that appeal to this individuality. SunnyD has launched a new campaign urging teens to "drink to their own beat", while using new avenues like Hulu, Spotify, and more to advertise their product where the consumers are spending their time (*PR Newswire*).

While many sources reference companies that have attempted to cater to Gen Z, Taco Bell is frequently referenced as an excellent example of the way a company has adapted its strategy to be present where its potential customers are spending the most time, especially customers falling in the post millennial age group. Many of their marketing tactics have taken them outside the box of traditional methods. "That's led the fast-food chain to lean in to

emerging platforms, including Periscope; build campaigns around cultural moments, such as 'promposals'; and continue to embrace food mashups" (Rodriguez).

MTV has begun creating programming based on crowd-sourced information gathered through social media platforms. Its audience is, in effect, "ordering" content customized to what they want to see and consume. Once the cutting edge of pop culture trends, MTV is now asking for help catching up to what the present day teenager thinks is cool. "Growing up during the technology boom, millennials were the first generation to truly adopt multiplatform viewing. The next generation, however, practically had iPhones in their palms right after birth" (Baysinger). Knowing the expectations of today's teens for the kind of content displayed on smartphones and multiplatform viewing is imperative in creating a strategy that connects with them.

While Facebook is still the most used social media platform among U.S. adults at 68%, Instagram (a property of Facebook) has been rapidly growing its usage percentage to 28%, up 4% over last year (Pew Research). The way that Facebook and other social media platforms are used by Gen Z is based on function. Their usage is segmented to platforms for specific purposes, rather than using all possible avenues of each. For example, "Facebook is not a channel for sharing but rather an informational hub. Snapchat, by contrast, is the real-life platform, where teens share what they're up to privately with select friend groups. Instagram, meanwhile is the aspirational platform, where teens post only carefully groomed imagery of themselves" (Fromm).

The most popular social media application among post-millennials is TikTok. The app has seen rapid acceleration in use among today's teenagers. It was the number one downloaded app on the Apple App Store in 2018 (Iqbal). What draws teens to this app is its versatility that

integrates "copyright agreements that let users record themselves lip-syncing to popular music, but it also plays host to a rapidly flourishing meme ecosystem" (*The Daily Intelligencer*).

Knowing how this demographic uses each platform to accomplish highly specific goals is an absolute necessity when planning a course of action to cater to these teens. "Experience-driven campaigns are social currency for young consumers who grew up with the ability to share things instantly. 'The concept of social-media marketing is dead for Generation Z,' said Jeff Fromm, president of FutureCast and a marketing consultant focused on millennials. 'Content marketing that's inspirational and engaging becomes a social transmission vehicle'." (Rodriguez).

So, if Generation Z is so focused on using social currency that aligns with their values to communicate who they are, what exactly do they value? Studies indicate that post millennials listed animal rights, the environment, civil rights, LGBTQ rights, and pro-life as the causes they find more important (Russo & Grant). The social commentary coming from this age group is not without optimism as, "Research conducted by Wunderman shows that nearly three-quarters of Gen Z believe they can change the world, but 85 percent put more trust in private companies than government. And nearly 90 percent say they're only loyal to brands that share their values" (Tynan). Their belief that they can enact change in society demonstrates how seriously they take their purchasing decisions.

No longer can brands avoid engaging in difficult, timely movements. The reward is far greater than the risk involved with taking a stand in social justice movements. This generation is studying advertisements to see what ways brands will support or detract from their own personal belief systems. Brand activism does not guarantee loyalty from their consumers. "The most

politically woke, socially responsible, innovative companies in the world are never more than one click away from losing their customers to a competitor" (Tynan).

Participation in social movements is not without its hazards. Pepsi learned that lesson the hard way when it released a commercial in April 2017 that combined protesters in the Black Lives Movement, police and white model Kendall Jenner (Victor). The ad trivialized protests against police brutality by settling both sides with cans of Pepsi. Their attempt to not take a stance in a topical issue and oversimplifying racial justice issues backfired in an epic way. It is the perfect example of how brands both must take a side and tread lightly when engaging in high profile issues.

The focus on social engagement has created an environment perfect for social media influencers to flourish in the marketing space. "Research from Shareablee covering more than 100,000 brands finds that branded-content posts by influencers on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter generate more than 50 percent more engagement--likes, comments, shares, etc.--than content distributed other ways, including conventional paid ads through publishers" (Neff & Stein). The proof of the effectiveness of creating a relatable brand image is in the numbers. These influencers are the epitome of the personas that Gen Zs want to adopt more so than traditional celebrity endorsements.

> Sharablee CEO Tania Yuki says influencers appear to combine aspects of star power along with greater "believability" for their fan bases. In fact, a detailed look at activity by more than 40 influencers found posts of branded content that were labeled as sponsored had no less engagement from viewers than posts that weren't compensated. People also tend to trust influencer posts more than those directly

from brands, Yuki says. "By human nature, we trust people rather than corporations" (Neff & Stein).

That craving for authenticity is no more perfectly demonstrated than in TikTok, the latest application craze among this age-group. "The defining quality of TikTok, some would argue, is its earnestness. It is full of people of all ages singing along to cheesy songs and acting unguarded. In an age of rampant toxicity polluting the largest internet platforms, the videos' naivete can feel like a breath of fresh air" (*The Daily Intelligencer*). These strongholds of positivity that exist online seem to be where the focus continues to shift. It is very likely that following the yellow brick road of authenticity and positive energy will lead you to the next emerging platform.

Taking the research and analyses conducted thus far on the post-millennial generation's interests, buying habits, values, and social media behavior, this project will create a guide for marketers to effectively create campaigns and content that connects with the next generation of consumers. Their decisions and loyalties are guided by their individual brand identities. Connecting to those identities is the most important element for content creation and marketing strategy.

Research Methodology

Methodologies commonly used in this field of study are typically postmodernism and psychoanalytic theories. These examine the various sources of motivation that have led post millennials to developing into the kind of people and consumers which they have become. For the purpose of this project, a combination of quantitative and qualitative research was used to try to gain an understanding of this age group.

Technology has the ability to provide anonymity, which allows individuals to avoid the attention of the super-ego. The advent of the internet has accelerated the impact of hyperreality, which is a concept developed by postmodernist critics. Hyperreality is described as "*everything is a model or an image, all is surface without depth*" according to French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (Barry, 85-86). Because the Internet is intangible, there quite literally is no depth and there is only imagery and symbolism. The ability for Internet users themselves to become models or images that represent something intangible only furthers the hyperreal atmosphere of the web.

Researchers argue that online services like *Second Life* support the creation of artificial connections with no meaning. "Sherry Turkle suggested that in their on-screen lives, people consisted of no more than a set of arbitrary words and symbols" (Hodkinson, 273). These services are allowing individuals to become hyperreal versions of people. Even though many social media users employ the use of their own names for their profiles, the disconnection created by the Internet, especially services that allow for anonymity, can sometimes obscure their personal identification with the person they create online.

While there are plenty of opportunities for the postmodernist critic to identify examples of hyperreal scenarios online, there are still a large segment of web consumers that still use their own identities. Although there are internet platforms that allow alternate identities, the overwhelming usage of social media sites proves that the majority of people are using their online presence to interact in a way consistent with their offline selves. "Research on the subject confirms that such media tend to be seamlessly integrated within the broader lives and identities of individuals" (Hodkinson, 76). Rather than replacing their lives with social media, consumers are complementing their lives with these tools.

Although users may not be creating false lives about themselves, the messages they consume through the platform can create the feeling of hyperreality. One of the factors that creates a different kind of hyperreality online is the total impossibility for consumers to comprehend all the messages that are being aimed at them. There is too much visual content and messaging to digest therefore the consumers only have symbols. This is explained by Nick Stevenson as "leading to a replacement of understanding with a range of superficial surfaces" (Hodkinson, 268).

Further examples of hyperreality are provided while looking at the privacy that the Internet affords to participants who might not otherwise behave in that manner. Technology provides anonymity, which allows individuals to avoid the attention of the super-ego. Depersonalization and physical isolation give opportunities to return to basic instincts without concern of the watchful eye of public opinion.

"Without knowing friend from foe, or credible analysis from "fake news," societies become paralyzed, unable to coordinate against a shape-shifting enemy that many doubt is even there. Curiously, this strategy is nearly identical to the one described by Julian Assange in his 2006 manifesto, in which he explained that the point of mass leaks was to prevent the target organization's internal communication and coordination" (Marechal). This phenomenon adds to the feeling of hyperreality created for social media users.

Furthermore, the impact of the hyperreality created by social media messages and images has had far reaching effects on life offline. Buzzfeed conducted one of my favorite investigations into the way that social media and the overabundance of content creators impacted the 2016 US presidential election. Fake news sites received more engagement during the final months before

the election than established news outlets, thanks to Facebook's algorithm and a general

misunderstanding of the public on what constitutes credible sources online. Completely falsified

"news" stories sky-rocketed to the top of the trending bar on the Facebook homepage.

An example of the extreme bumps these false news sites received through Facebook,

"Along with unreliable hyperpartisan blogs, fake news sites also received a big election traffic

bump in line with their Facebook success. The *Burrard Street Journal* scored nearly 380,000

Facebook engagements for a fake story about Obama saying he will not leave office if Trump is

elected" (Silverman).

The biggest hit from a well-established news site received 876,000 engagements in the

three months prior to the election. That hit was from the *Washington Post*. But a news site called

Ending the Fed, which was launched in March 2016, somehow managed to get significantly

higher engagement on a fake news story shared on its Facebook page (Silverman).

Clearly, algorithms present the first set of challenges for content creators to overcome in

the 21st century. Even high-quality content creators like the *Washington Post*, with its established

online following and readership, was unable to overcome the obstacles that the algorithm and

unusual engagement presented.

Another study conducted by Buzzfeed found that news stories with mostly false

information received higher engagement than the stories that were more factual. The algorithm

cannot take the full responsibility for this divide, which means that Facebook users that are

sharing and reading articles are sharing the inaccurate content more than the accurate content.

During a week in September 2016, researchers tracked the engagement of both hyperpartisan

right-wing pages, mainstream pages, and hyperpartisan left-wing pages. The team "rated 82 out of a total 666 right-wing Facebook posts as mostly false, for a percentage of 12.3%. Another 169 posts (25.4%) were rated as a mixture of true and false. Viewed separately or together (38%), this is an alarmingly high percentage" (Silverman, et al.).

The research is disturbing because of how the Facebook algorithm manipulates content to skew towards certain political and economic leanings. These manipulations are frightening for a variety of reasons, most of which are related to the way those manipulations impact human behavior and development. Additionally, these bots are milling out even more content that social media users can never hope to fully comprehend, due to the onslaught of real and false information constantly filtering across their screens. Hyperreality has become a standard way of life without anyone even noticing.

This new reality has greatly impacted the way that these social networking platforms, Facebook in particular, have developed and evolved. Younger generations that have grown up alongside this technology barely know life without it. As we have previously discussed, this technology has become an integral part of society and consumer behavior. While many researchers and parents argue that participation in these platforms has a negative impact on social development, others argue that using these tools and making mistakes with them has become a new sort of rite of passage into adulthood. This developmental context is of particular interest to psychoanalytic critics and their studies of social media.

Without the direct attention of the super-ego from religion, education, parental discipline, or even culturally normative behavior to oversee a person's behaviors, it would seem from this research that precedence is given to *Eros*, the life instinct, and *Thanatos*, the death instinct, rather

than being balanced out by the power of the super-ego (Barry, 93). Psychoanalysts would argue that this lack of powerful oversight has a large impact on the development of young people.

Non-participation in social networking sites is hardly an option in the current culture, especially when it comes to the younger generations. That must be understood by those wishing to apply psychoanalytic theory to the study of digital content and its impact on personal development. "Social media create new structures of self-awareness, visibility and display, and with this, new ways to performatively constitute what it means to become adult, and also to see what young people perceive adulthood to be. As such, social media engagement in fact becomes a function of adulthood" (Gabriel).

An example of how deeply connected the Internet has become in teen culture is the use of memes to mean a multitude of things. We have entered an era where we have returned to hieroglyphics. A meme is defined as "a humorous image, video, piece of text, etc., that is copied (often with slight variations) and spread rapidly by Internet users" (Caldwell &LNH). These images and videos are used across the web as independent forms of communication with little to no context amongst the post-millennials sharing. Oftentimes, memes are images taken from pop culture icons and then modified to reflect new meaning. One such image is a cartoon image of a dog in a restaurant surrounded by flames. The caption simply states, "This is fine."
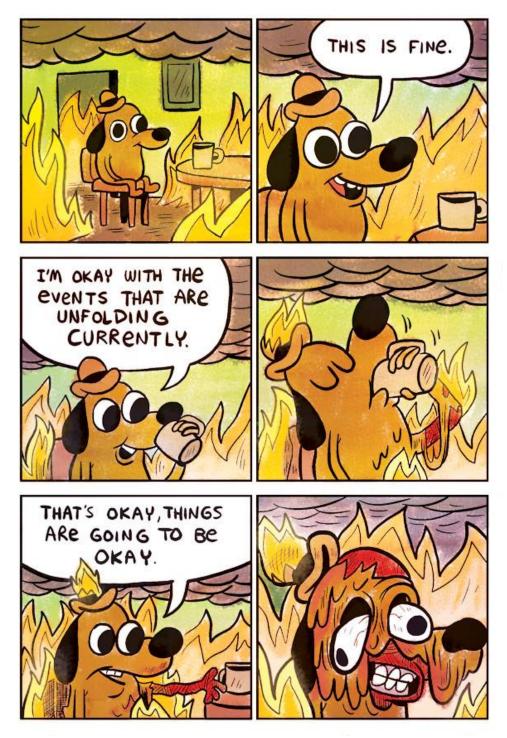
Figure 1. Caldwell, Don, and LNH. "This Is Fine." Know Your Meme, 16 Apr. 2019, knowyourmeme.com/memes/this-is-fine.

"This is fine" was first shared in 2014, but has been used in a variety of contexts from

Imgur to political Twitter accounts and beyond. The most important thing to remember about

this meme and others like it is that they are meant to be facetious rather than literal. Every time

this image is used, it must be used in a sarcastic sense to be properly understood. This meme is

an excellent example of how a piece of art or culture can find new life and usage through social

media.

With the information gathered about how the post-millennial generation interacts with

marketing and social media, marketers and businesses have the ability to understand how to

create content and communication that resonates in an already overly crowded environment.

Production and analysis

As marketing directly to the post-millennial generation is still in the early stages of

development, before this project there was not a resource the combines the existing research and

progress into one resource specifically oriented towards the marketing industry. In recent years,

marketing, pop-culture, and social media have been deeply intertwined in how the other

progresses. Combining these three into one, digestible summary is a much-needed tool as the

demand for knowledge for this age group continues to grow.

The project consists primarily of a PowerPoint presentation that was created using the

previously described research. The presentation was combined with a digital recording of a

webinar where the author elaborates on the points and examples of the characteristics and

behaviors of the post-millennial generation as they behave in 2019. This age group is still quite

young so this webinar will be useful until another dramatic shift occurs in their purchasing habits

and digital media consumption.

Conclusions

There are a few things that I would have done differently with my project had I known what I know now at the beginning of the semester. First of all, I realized that trying to condense a generation's behaviors and values into a single, 30-minute webinar was a bit ambitious. If I were to do the project over, I would definitely segment my research into a series of webinar episodes to focus on specific platforms, campaigns, and behaviors in depth, rather than attempting to address everything from a thousand-foot view. I think that being able to drill down into specific areas of importance would have created a more usable end product than the overview I completed. While I do not think that my overview is not worthwhile, I wish that I had given myself extra room to delve into more specifics.

While there is research available concerning purchasing habits and social media usage patterns, many factors that contribute to a purchasing funnel for this age group are still being defined. Because post-millennials are still so young, many of their buying habits are still largely influenced by their parents.

Additionally, having a series of videos would have worked to my advantage because I kept having to reshoot my webinar as things are rapidly changing in the digital landscape particularly with the post-millennial group. If I had focused on individual platforms like Instagram or Snapchat, their usage has only experienced slight changes since I started this project. TikTok emerged very rapidly over the last few months and is a vital piece of technology to people who wish to properly understand and relate to Gen Z. Unfortunately, I was unable to include much of TikTok's rapid growth in my project due to the time constraints of shooting my longer form video.

Additionally, this project offered an opportunity to examine how various attempts to directly target post-millennials have succeeded or failed. With an arsenal of positive and negative examples, advertisers can learn from the successes and failures of past campaigns to inform future projects. While this project did not provide a comprehensive look at a generation, it did create a template for what marketers and researchers can track as more information becomes available.

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