

# Guest editorial

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## Are they all the same? A rethink of young consumers through the lens of generation theories

### *Background*

Despite extant literature on young consumers and their characteristics, much remains to be done to explore and explain young consumers' behaviour through the lens of generation, particularly with theoretical grounding and practical insights. Young consumers and their lifestyles evolve more rapidly today because of the dynamic environment they live in. Hence, their behaviours are more complex and unpredictable than young people in the past and older generations (Kasser and Kanner, 2004; Pyšňoáková and Miles, 2010; Vandegrift, 2015). Prior research has also shown that cataclysmic events create distinct values and behavioural patterns among individuals in different time periods (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Rogler, 2002; Ting *et al.*, 2018). These major external events, also known as defining moments, develop and define generational cohorts. Hence, the study of the young generation is not only about identifying their behaviours at a point of time but also about gaining more insights into their changing behaviours in relation to social contexts.

Generation theories, such as the generational cohort theory, posit that a group of individuals who experience the same cataclysmic events (e.g. political, economic and social events) during late adolescence and early adulthood will develop a similar set of characteristics (Inglehart, 1997; Meredith and Schewe, 1994; Ting *et al.*, 2018). As such, this concept acknowledges the role of collective experiences (and memories) acquired during individuals' formative years. Subsequently, their attachment to external events when they come of age creates cohesiveness in beliefs, values and behaviours, which distinguishes one cohort from another (Rogler, 2002). Notably, the impact of such events on individuals is found to remain relatively stable throughout their lives regardless of age and life cycle stage (Inglehart, 1997; Lowe *et al.*, 2020).

Given the magnitude of external events and social changes that have transpired over the past two decades, there is a dire need to revisit young consumers' behaviour through the lens of generation theories in the contemporary context. Millennials, who are now in their adulthood, were raised in an era of remarkable socio-economic, cultural and technological change, which makes them different from other generations (Schewe and Noble, 2000). Thus, they display behaviours which are seen as disruptive (Moschis, 2007), impulsive (Grousiou *et al.*, 2015) and vulnerable (Brennan, *et al.*, 2017). This rings truer for youth born between the late 1990s and the early-mid 2000s. Moreover, the adoption of generational labels from Western sources (e.g. baby boomers, Generation X and Generation Y) in different settings has long been criticised for its lack of theoretical bases (de Run and Ting, 2013; Strauss and Howe, 1991). Notwithstanding the convenience it offers in determining specific population segments as research samples, the overestimation of similarities among generation cohorts worldwide and the assumption that young consumers' behaviours are identical across different contexts compromise the rigour of research as well as the

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meaningfulness of its findings (Ivanova *et al.*, 2019; Ting *et al.*, 2018; Yelkur, 2002). The need to further explore young consumers' behaviour using generation theories is thus the very motive of this special issue arrangement with *Young Consumers*.

The rationale of the present special issue is to look into the application of generation theories and provide explanations of young consumers' behaviours in different settings. It enhances the understanding of the generational effect in different social contexts as well as its contributions to behavioural changes among youth when they come of age (Berkowitz and Schewe, 2011). In addition to introducing the seven featured articles, this editorial offers an overview of past studies pertaining to generational cohorts along with a rethink of the future research.

### ***Introduction to the articles in special issue***

The first article, titled "Driving healthcare wearable technology adoption for Generation Z consumers in Hong Kong" and authored by Cheung, Leung and Chan, reports a study that aimed to investigate the major factors driving the adoption of health-care wearable technology products by Generation Z consumers in Hong Kong. Drawing on the generational cohort theory and the technology acceptance model, the study reveals that consumer innovativeness and electronic word-of-mouth referrals are significant predictors of perceived credibility, perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness, which subsequently drive online engagement intention and adoption intention. It thus provides a theoretical and practical understanding of young consumers' perceptions and behavioural intentions towards health-care wearable technology.

The second article by Cham, Cheng and Ng looks into the effect of psychological and marketing factors on clothing interest, as well as the interrelationships among self-confidence, product attitude and purchase intention in the context of young consumers in Malaysia and Thailand. Titled "Cruising down millennials' fashion runway: a cross-functional study beyond Pacific borders", the findings confirm the importance of fashion innovativeness, self-concept, fashion consciousness and the need for uniqueness as psychological factors and social media marketing and fashion advertisement as marketing factors. It also shows the difference in clothing interest and purchase intention between Malaysian and Thai consumers. In doing so, the study highlights the relevance of different social contexts in young consumers' behaviours, despite these consumers being of the same age.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, are we ready for Gen-Z in the marketplace? A study of smart retailing technology in Malaysia" is the third article, authored by Ng, Ho, Lim, Chong and Latiff from Malaysia. Their study investigated Generation Z consumers' expectations of smart retail technology using the stimulus-organism-response framework as the theoretical basis. The findings underscore the influences of perceived usefulness, perceived enjoyment and perceived value on young consumers' attitude and word of mouth. Particularly, their expectations of usefulness, enjoyment and value for money were identified in this study. Therefore, the study provides meaningful insights and justifications for retailers to put more emphasis on innovative solutions, a pleasant experience and value perceptions to capture young consumers' attention.

Societal changes and technological development have brought about drastic change to young generations compared to older cohorts. The fourth paper, titled "Identification of consumption patterns: an empirical study of millennials", is a study that adopted brand image as a determinant of brand attitude and assessed the moderating effect of brand equity to explain the use of online information among young shoppers in Colombia. This work by Escandon-Barbosa, Hurtado-Ayala, Rialp-Criado and Salas-Paramo unearths the relevance of generational membership in classifying individuals by their brand perceptions and shopping channel usage. Evidently, young consumers use more online communication

sources to generate brand perception. The study thus articulates young consumers' behaviour in relation to online vs offline communication in the contemporary setting.

The fifth paper, "Brand engagement in self-concept, value consciousness, and brand loyalty: a study of generation Z consumers in Malaysia", details research that examined the relationships among these three variables for Generation Z consumers. Authored by Ismail, Nguyen, Chen, Melewar and Mohamad, the study reveals that both brand engagement in self-concept and value consciousness have a positive effect on brand loyalty among young consumers. Moreover, the authors identified four segments of young consumers, namely, attentive consumers, dedicated consumers, prospective consumers and switchers. Drawing upon the application of market segmentation, the paper carries potent managerial implications in relation to marketing strategy.

Titled "How logistics capabilities offered by retailers influence millennials' online purchasing attitudes and intentions", Riley and Klein's study sought to understand young consumers' use of online retail channels. They examined how tracking capabilities, delivery speed, trust, logistics carriers' reputation, people important to consumers and online reviews influence young consumers' online purchasing attitudes and intentions. As the sixth article in this special issue, this paper also narrates the moderating effect of carrier reputation on trust in online purchase. As such, it provides useful insights on how to better develop e-commerce service offerings in a manner that yields favourable behavioural intention among young consumers.

The seventh article, with the title "Understanding online shopping behaviours and purchase intentions amongst millennials", is on the online purchase behaviours of young consumers in Australia and the USA. Dharmesti, Dharmesti, Kuhne and Thaichon's study indicated that young consumers in these two countries have a positive attitude towards online shopping, which significantly affects their online purchase intentions. Despite both groups being familiar with online purchasing, the findings unveil the differences in social motives, escapism and values between the Australian and the US samples. Using the generational cohort theory, this paper enhances the knowledge on the young generation's values and characteristics that influence their online purchase behaviours across two different settings. Implications for marketers and policymakers to improve their marketing efforts and services are also discussed.

### *Generation cohorts in different countries*

Given the importance of generation in knowledge and practice, researchers across the globe have begun and continue to explore actual generational cohorts' respective characteristics in their own settings. In fact, the shortcoming of using common age groups or median years of birth rather than formative years and major external events as proxies for generation in cross-cultural studies has long been highlighted (Inglehart, 1997). Apart from studies in and about the USA (Holbrook and Schindler, 1994; Schuman and Scott, 1989), studies on generation cohorts have also been conducted in Russia, Brazil (Schewe and Meredith, 2004), China (Egri and Ralston, 2004; Hung *et al.*, 2007), France (Excousseau, 2000; Treguer, 2008), The Netherlands (Ester *et al.*, 2000), Malaysia (Ting *et al.*, 2018), England, Germany and Japan (Schuman *et al.*, 1998; Scott and Zac, 1993).

Table 1 provides an overview of past studies pertaining to generation cohorts in different countries and continents. It is especially noteworthy that generation cohorts in the USA (North America), China (Asia), Russia (Europe), Brazil (South America), Nigeria (Africa) and Australia (Oceania) do not share the same characteristics due to their attachment to different external events in their formative years (Fernández-Durán, 2016). Although some generation labels appear to be the same, such as "Generation X" in the USA, Nigeria and Australia, their characteristics are not entirely alike. Therefore, notwithstanding the impact of some global events, the presence of regional events and local customs have a profound role in shaping

**Table 1** Generation cohorts in different countries

<i>Generation label (birth years)</i>	<i>Formative years (major events)</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
<i>USA (North American region)</i>		
Selected sources: Holbrook and Schindler (1989); <a href="#">Schuman and Scott (1989)</a>		
Depression (1912–1921)	1930–1939 (Great Depression)	Financial security still rules their thinking
Second World War (1922–1927)	1940–1945 (Second World War)	Unified by a common enemy, shared experiences; a sense of deferment and delayed gratification; had a defined role, a measure of freedom from their particular social norms and an opportunity to travel; horrors and heroism
Post-War (1928–1945)	1946–1963 (Korean War; Sputnik; the first stirrings of the civil rights movement; a brief recession)	Conservative, seeking something comfortable, secure, familiar
Leading-edge Baby Boomer (1946–1954)	1963–1972 (Kennedy assassination, followed by that of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy)	Wanted a lifestyle at least as good as they had experienced as children; individualism indulgence of self, stimulation and questioning nature
Trailing-edge Baby Boomer (1955–1965)	1973–1983 (the stop of the Vietnam War Watergate; the Arab Oil Embargo)	Cause-oriented; a narcissistic preoccupation with themselves which manifested itself in everything from the self-help movement; self-depreciation
Generation X (1965–1976)	1984–1994 (a period of relative economic uncertainty and rising divorce rates leaving many from this generation to be raised in lower income homes by a single parent)	Political conservatism; feel alienated
N-Generation (1977–1994)	(Information revolution)	More idealistic and social-cause oriented
<i>China (Asian region)</i>		
Selected sources: <a href="#">Yi et al. (2015)</a> , <a href="#">Hung et al. (2007)</a>		
The Cultural Revolution generation (1961–1966)	1966–1976 (cultural revolution and extreme poverty in their youth)	First generation in the history of China to engage in the deregulated economy and they consider financial security to be important
The Social Reform generation (1971–1976)	1980–1991 (Economic Reform)	They are more realistic and pragmatic than the Cultural Revolution generation; They are thought of as the recipients of the benefits modernisation has brought; increased level of material prosperity
The Millennials generation, also refers to One-Child Generation (1981–1986)	1990s and thereafter (China was integrating into the global community; increased levels of affluence in society and consumerist messages in the media; internet connection with the outside world)	Stereotypical traits, such as being selfish, self-centred, rebellious and irresponsible
<i>Russia (European region)</i>		
Source: <a href="#">Schewe and Meredith (2004)</a>		
Collectivisation (1912–1923)	1929–1940 (collectivisation of agriculture)	Dedication to party; nationalistic; believe in and rely on state; suspicious of west
Great Patriotic War (1924–1936)	1941–1953 (Second World War; Cold War; Death of Stalin)	Intensely patriotic; nationalistic; resent youth; feel unappreciated; against perestroika
The thaw (1937–1952)	1954–1969 (Sputnik; International Youth Festival; Gagarin first man to orbit earth; "Prague Spring")	Greater social and economic freedom; idealism; individuality; support perestroika
Stagnation (1953–1968)	1970–1985 (bad economic times; Emigration to the West; Gorbachev's rise to power)	Erosion of faith in communism; inner-directedness; pessimistic about future; cynical and withdrawn; 30% prefer to live outside Russia
Perestroika (1969–1974)	1986–1991 (Perestroika and glasnost; Chernobyl; Parliamentary elections; Fall of	Political activists; against central authority; 50% prefer to live outside Russia; materialistic

*(continued)*

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<i>Generation label (birth years)</i>	<i>Formative years (major events)</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
Post-Soviet (1975- after)	Berlin Wall; Yeltsin elected President; Soviet Union dissolved; 1991 communist coup attempt) 1992 onwards (privatisation and economic reforms; Chechnya War; Stock market collapse)	Self-sufficient; cynical; streetwise; materialistic; amoral; actively want to leave Russia
<i>Brazil (South American region)</i>		
Selected source: <a href="#">Schewe and Meredith (2004)</a>		
Vargas Era (1913–1928)	1930–1945 (Vargas' coup)	Nationalism; state as a solution; being is better than having; acceptance of authority
Post-war (1929–1937)	1946–1954 (Vargas' deposition/Dutra's election to President)	Moral tradition; value of having
Optimism (1938–1950)	1955–1967 (Vargas' suicide/President Kubitschek's election)	Country of the future; youth culture and looking abroad
The Iron Years (1951–1962)	1968–1979 (Dictatorship instituted; social crisis; Institutional Act No. 5 [abolished democratic congress])	Belligerence; alienation; silence; myth of grandiosity; value of education
The Lost Decade (1963–1974)	1980–1991 (Amnesty for activists; end of economic growth)	Fear; frustration; materialism; individualism; hopelessness
Be on your own (1975- after)	1992-current (Government crisis; President Collor's impeachment; change in currency to real)	Self-sufficiency; consumerism; recovery of ethical and moral values
<i>Nigeria (African region)</i>		
Selected source: <a href="#">Christiansen (2019)</a>		
Traditionalist (1928–1948)	(Colonial era; witnesses foreign domination and forced obedience to hierarchy)	Dedication to duty; sacrifice; hard work; respect for authority; orientation to details; duty before pleasure; job security in exchange for loyalty to organization; willing to delay gratification
Baby Boomers (1949–1965)	(witnessed early part of independence)	Personal identity; workaholic; sees long working hours as evidence of success; hardworking; loves titles; questions authority; team orientation; job security
Gen X (1965–1979)	(boom in the economy)	Values work–life balance; willing to leave legacy; appreciate empowerment; does not like micro-managing; love feedback; indifference to authority; loyal to peers not company; entrepreneurial; impatient and needs flexibility
Gen Y (1980–2000)	(shortage of funds in the country; massive corruption; end of job security; saw the detrimental effect of corruption on delayed gratification of their parents)	Optimistic; tech savvy; ambitious and strong sense of self; hero mentality; likes to be involved in decision-making; multi-tasking; very vocal
<i>Australia (Oceanian region)</i>		
Selected sources: <a href="#">Mackay (1998)</a> , <a href="#">Australian Institute of Company Directors (2012)</a>		
Oldest Generation (1891–1926)	(interrupted employment and family formation during the Great Depression)	Religious affiliation; faiths
Lucky Generation (1926–1946)	(full employment and prosperity during the post-World War II economic boom; affected by the privations resulting from the Great Depression in their formative years)	Hardworking and stoic generation who seek stability and security
Baby Boomers (1946–1966)	(the older Baby Boomers entered the labour force when economic conditions were buoyant and experienced high rates of employment; the younger members of this generation have not had the same employment opportunities throughout their	Optimism; peculiar tension, which is the tension between belief in a rosy, easy future on the one hand and no future at all on the other

*(continued)*

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<i>Generation label (birth years)</i>	<i>Formative years (major events)</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
Generation X and Y (1966–1986)	working lives as older Baby Boomers, with many affected by the economic downturn in the late 1980s and early 1990s (increased rates of parental separation and divorce; user-pays higher education and job insecurity)	Generation X has high level of loyalty to their managers and leaders. They have chosen to start a family later in life Generation Y are a more optimistic generation and are a team-orientated generation
i-Generation (1986–2006)	(spent their formative years in a period which saw the birth and rise of the internet)	Secular generations

generations and their characteristics across different countries ([Schindler and Holbrook, 1993](#)).

### *Rethink of future research*

Individuals' collective experiences of cataclysmic events during their formative years are the fundamental tenets of a generation. Because of the impact of these events and the presence of local customs, the characteristics of individuals from different countries cannot be exactly the same though they share the same age ([Schewe et al., 2013](#)). It is thus apparent that generation cannot be regarded as a demographic variable ([Ting et al., 2018](#)). Suffice to say, using birth years or age to define consumers or employees by generation and to justify study samples without referring to generation theories should be avoided. Although some global events, such as the pandemic crisis and the advancement of communication technology, have prevailing effects, the casual adoption of generational labels across contexts is void of theoretical grounding and also jeopardises the practical usefulness of research to the real world, specifically for research on market segmentation and young consumers' behaviour.

Moving forward, it is crucial to rethink future research related to the young generation in various disciplines. Defining and operationalising generations is never a clear-cut exercise ([Cadiz et al., 2015](#)). Apart from existing generation theories, exploring other grand and mid range theories in psychology and sociology will help provide better explanations of generational phenomena in different contexts and at different levels (e.g. individual, organisational and national levels). Moreover, another issue in generation research is the impediment to unravelling and distinguishing the effects of age, period and cohort ([Costanza and Finkelstein, 2015](#)). The work of [Parry and Urwin \(2017\)](#) shows that the assumptions and definition of generation cohort may alter over time because of the impact of period effects on individuals' attitude and behaviour. Hence, the interactions among age, life cycle, period and generation signify that the articulation of young consumers' behaviour in different settings would require a more robust research design, stringent assessment and meticulous interpretation.

Another research aspect that requires further investigation is generational change, wherein a generation replaces a prior generation ([Cooper et al., 2018](#)). The global shift in population age distribution does indeed motivate the need to study another generation ([Duxbury and Ormsbee, 2020](#); [Thangavel et al., 2019](#)). In addition, transgenerational and intergenerational research can be carried out to assess and compare two or more generations ([Bengtson et al., 2018](#); [Wellner, 2003](#)). Specifically, research on intergenerational transmission would be useful to unveil young consumers' values and characteristics that are either inherited from prior generations or adopted from those in the same generation. The examination of transgenerational branding, for example, can help practitioners broaden the reach of their products, both horizontally (involving multiple generations at once) and vertically (allowing the brands to cross generations over time) ([Bourcier-Béquaert and de Barnier, 2010](#)).

Furthermore, future studies can be expanded to comparatively analyse the behaviour of young consumers who stay with their parents or grandparents against those who study or work in foreign countries as migrants during their formative years (Yip *et al.*, 2020; Pekerti and Arli, 2017; Saar *et al.*, 2017; Ting *et al.*, 2016). As the present pandemic crisis marks another epoch in human history, the rethink of young consumers' behaviour through the lens of generation will remain relevant and necessary.

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### Further reading

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