Social media and digital marketing perceptions: Intra- and Inter-generational similarities and differences among Gen X, Y and Z

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ABSTRACT:

This study explores the intra- and inter-generational similarities and differences in the perceptions of generations X, Y, and Z towards social media and digital marketing. Previous research articles in Google Scholar and Research Gate databases were referred for this purpose. Traditional media has more influence on GenX than online media. Differences do occur within generations hence, homogeneity of generations is questionable. Single online platform marketing may not be effective in influencing all generations as their preferences differ and therefore a multi-online platform approach with an omni-channel presence is warranted. Intra- and inter-generational differences and similarities in perceptions need to be looked upon while promoting the products and services. Though extensive studies have been conducted on the perceptions of generations towards social media and digital marketing, there is a gap and a need to explore further the intra- and inter-generational differences and similarities among GenX, Y, and Z.

Keywords: Digital marketing, Social media, Inter-generational perceptions, Intra-generational perceptions

1.0 INTRODUCTION

A generation is regarded collectively as a group of people born within the same range of birth years and are considered to share and experience similar social, cultural, and historical events that would have influenced their behavior, attitude, traits, and values (Mahmoud et al., 2020). Each generational cohort has its own unique set of tastes and preferences. Generations are segmented based on the birth period (Figure 1).

Table 1. *Segmentation of population based on birth period*

Generations	Birth Period
Baby Boomers	1943 – 1960
Generation X (GenX)	1960 – 1980
Generation Y (GenY)/ Millennials	1981 – 1994
Generation Z (GenZ)	1994 – 2012
Generation Alpha	Born after 2012

(Source: Researcher)

The market is mainly driven by GenX, Y, and Z as they together comprise more than 90% of the consumer segment. GenX, are called digital immigrants as they were born when digital media platforms were not available but they are slowly turning towards the online world. GenY or 'Millennials' are digital natives as they grew up with the latest online digital technologies like computers, and the internet. They have experienced both online and offline worlds and are considered to be the connecting link between old and future generations. GenZ are mobile natives born when the internet and smartphones became a primary need. They have not witnessed a world without internet and online platforms. Generation Alpha or 'Google Kids' is the generation born after GenZ (Shaw, 2020) (Table 2).

Table 2. *Characteristics of Generations X, Y, and Z*

Generation	Birth Period (years)	Characteristics
Generation X (Post Boomers)	1960 – 1980	Showing interest in learning and adapting to the latest technologies
Generation Y (Millennials)	1981 – 1994	Grew and matured with computer, internet, and social media platforms. They are the connecting link between the past and future generations
Generation Z (Generation Next)	1995 – 2012	They have an uncanny talent to master any new digital technology with ease. The first generation fully grew up with technology.

(Source: Researcher)

In this internet era, social media and digital marketing activities play an important role in everyone's life. This has started to impact the consumer behavior intention and decision-making process. Hence, businesses and marketers need to understand the differences and similarities in the perceptions of various generational cohorts while developing a digital marketing strategy to promote their products or services.

1.1 Digital Marketing and Generations

Nowadays, all age groups are active on social media and online platforms. Most of them are active on more than 2 social media platforms and use online media for searching information, and knowledge, to connect with people, and for entertainment and leisure purposes. The emergence of online and social media platforms has given rise to a new mode of marketing called 'digital marketing'. Organizations have understood the potentials of reaching a wider range of target populations through online platforms and have started to invest more resources in digital marketing avenues (Bratina and Faganel, 2024).

Even though traditional marketing channels exist, the importance of digital marketing avenues has increased in recent times due to the free availability of the Internet. As we are all living in a connected world, brands need to understand the perceptions and preferences of different generational cohorts, as their online and social media behavior and activities differ. There are certain factors like online reviews and ratings, suggestions given by friends, family members, peer groups, and celebrity endorsements that do have an impact on the online purchase decisions of all generations (Sakhanenko, 2024). GenX who are new to online and social media platforms spend less time compared to GenY and GenZ. GenZ is the most active group compared to other generations. LinkedIn is considered a professional networking platform by all generational groups as they can showcase their professional experience and skills for career and business development (Priyanka, 2024). WhatsApp has become an easy platform for communication, sending instant messages and files among all generations. GenY and GenZ are bustling on multiple social media platforms and are trying out the latest social media platforms like Snapchat, Clubhouse, TikTok, etc. In the present scenario, all customer have easy access to a wide range of products and services online at their fingertips and this has an impact on the purchase intention of all generational cohorts in general (Sadaf, 2019) (Table 3).

Table 3. *Inter-generational Difference in Digital Characteristics and Active Social Media Platforms*

Generation	Digital characteristics	Active Social Media Platforms
GenX	Digital Immigrants	Facebook and Twitter
GenY	Digital Natives	Facebook and Instagram
GenZ	Mobile Natives	Instagram and Micro-video Platforms

(Source: Researcher)

Though each generation differs in their perceptions, they share certain common experiences and patterns. At times generations' perceptions overlap and differences in preference occur within the cohorts. Hence, understanding and realizing the generational differences and similarities and adjusting the digital marketing activities that appeal to different age groups can be critical for any brand's success (Boustani and Claude, 2023).

1.2 Inter-generational Perceptions

While drafting a digital marketing strategy, marketers need to have a clear idea about the targeted population and what attracts them. The targeted audience of businesses may include different generational groups, so understanding their perception towards online platforms and digital marketing activities will help to deliver the right marketing message at the right time on the right

platforms. Generations differ in their online usage pattern, time spent, social media platforms they are active in, online shopping behavior, and influence of social media and online platforms on their purchase decision (Anoop and Lakshmi, 2023).

All generations have started to use online platforms daily to keep themselves updated and to be in touch with their loved ones. Even though GenX is new to online and social media platforms, they are taking the initiative to learn and use them to keep themselves updated and competitive with GenY and GenZ (Slootweg and Bill, 2018). Though GenY and GenZ differ in their approach and preferences, they share certain common experiences as these groups are considered to be the pioneer users of online and social media platforms (Sadaf, 2019). GenX and GenY turn to GenZ for their digital and online needs (Bona et al., 2020). GenX thought of DVD players and giant desktops as the breakthrough inventions, whereas GenY felt mobile phones with tiny screens and the internet as the quantum leap developments. But, today GenZ is accustomed to unlimited internet access, electronic gadgets, and online streaming services (OTT). GenX views online and offline activities as two different worlds but, for GenZ there is no difference. GenY is considered to be the connecting link between analogue and digital generations. All generations have embraced e-commerce platforms for buying products and services due to their easiness and comfort. They also give importance to the feedback and reviews given by their family, friends, and peer group. Word of mouth also influences all generations' purchase and usability intentions. GenY and GenZ try to engage more with businesses and brands on social media compared to GenX (Thangavel et al., 2022).

Traditional marketing avenues like television ads still have an impact on all generations, though GenX is more attracted by conventional modes of advertising on television, newspaper, and radio compared to GenY and GenZ. The habit of reading newspapers has reduced in the younger generation but is still prevalent among GenX and GenY. Hence, for organizations it would be difficult to target GenZ through newspaper ads (Budree et al., 2019). All generational cohorts expect clarity, transparency, accountability, and authenticity in the marketing messages conveyed by businesses. They are also concerned about environmental and social issues and they expect brands and companies to support these facts. Content plays an important role in attracting all-generation customers. Video, image, and infographic content attract all generations, but only GenX looks into the text part of the content as well. All generations use smartphones to access social media and online platforms, for checking email and communication. Online and social media platforms facilitate two-way communication with businesses and brands, which makes GenY and GenZ more attracted to them. Businesses should develop user-friendly and informative websites so that they appeal to all generational cohorts. Customized and personalized marketing programs for each generational group need to be developed to reach them effectively (Hoai et al., 2020).

GenZ and Generation Alpha are considered to be the groups that have lived their entire lives in the internet and computer era (Hysa et al., 2022). Generations X, Y, and Z conceive online platforms and digital marketing activities differently, but they do show certain similarities as well. Hence, understanding their perspectives regarding digital platform marketing and online media is very important while developing and implementing an effective online marketing plan (Table 4). It is always important for marketers to understand the digital ecosystem of their target groups. As the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed consumer tastes and preferences, it is even more

important to know the inter-generational perception of cohorts towards online platforms and digital marketing activities (Ranjana and Priya, 2021).

Table 4. *Inter-generational Similarities in the Mode of Communication and Online Streaming Platforms*

Generation	Mode of Communication	Online Streaming Platforms
GenX	WhatsApp and Email	YouTube
GenY	WhatsApp and Email	YouTube and Gaana
GenZ	WhatsApp, Telegram and Email	YouTube, Gaana and OTT Platforms

(Source: Researcher)

1.3 Intra-generational Perceptions

Socio-cultural and political factors play an important role in the development of perception, behavior, attitude, values, and beliefs of people. Each generational cohort can be internally divided into three subgroups: early group, middle group, and late group, an overlapping of perception exists within the generations as the early group showed certain characteristics of the predecessor generation and the late group had certain features of the successor generation (Werenowska and Rzepka, 2020).

Thangavel et al., (2021) opined that generations share common birth years and are identifiable individuals but, they cannot be generalized as the factors and events influencing them differ based on geographical location. Socioeconomic and political events witnessed by people differ and reflect in their perspectives and attitudes. It is also suggested that there is a need to conduct further studies that concentrate on the intra-generational differences and inter-generational similarities. Damien et al., (2017) stated that more than generations, age plays an important role in the usage of social media and perception towards digital marketing activities. Advancements in technology have reduced the similarities between generations and increased differences within cohorts. The eldest in any cohort will be different from the youngest group, the middle group will have mixed characteristics of both, and the youngest group will have certain characteristics of the next generation (Nash, 2019).

Ana et al., (2022) stated that the differences within the generation make the marketing activities more complex. Thangavel et al., (2022) noted that the rural and urban divide, gender differences, and emergence of the nuclear family can affect the changes in the perceptions within the generation. They further stated that Pinterest usage is more common among GenX and GenY females, whereas males in both generations are not very active in it. Marcin (2017) opined that the younger group in GenY is more active on Instagram whereas the older group within the generation is active on Facebook. This shift can also be noticed among GenZ, as the young GenZ people have started to shift towards micro-video platforms like TikTok, Clubhouse, etc, whereas the older generation is active on Instagram and Snapchat. Zhou et al., (2022) stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the perception and online media usage patterns of all generations. OTT platform usage has increased among younger GenY and older GenZ individuals. Older GenX are actively watching programs on YouTube and younger individuals have started to watch movies on OTT platforms as well.

Marcin and Ilona (2018) opined that television and newspaper ads still create an impression and influence among GenX and older GenY, whereas it has very little impact on younger GenY and the whole of GenZ. Younger GenZ has started to become more active in the Telegram app compared to WhatsApp which has been used by older GenZ and other generational groups (Afifah, 2024). Millennials have many overlapping qualities among both Gen X and GenZ. This is because they have experienced both analogue and digital technology era in their life. Due to easy access to technology and people spending more time with technology and hence the differences in online usage between generations are reducing (Twenge, 2023).

From the previous studies, the researchers could assert that people's values, behavior, and perceptions need to be assessed and compared within the generation and with prior and successor generations to have a clear idea of their perspectives. Hence, there is a need for a comprehensive understanding of intra- and inter-generational differences and similarities which are required for marketers and businesses to better position their products and services to appeal to a wider audience.

1.4 Research Gap

Although there are numerous studies on the perceptions of each generational cohort towards social media and digital marketing activities, only a very few studies have focused on inter-generational and intra-generational differences and similarities among GenX, Y, and Z. This aspect remains largely unexplored and warrants further study and analysis.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study is descriptive based on secondary data obtained from previous research articles in this area.

2.1 Research Problem

- In this online era, all generations live in a connected world, hence there is an overlapping in the perceptions among generations and differences occur within the generational groups. Hence, it poses a challenge for marketers to understand the inter-generational and intra-generational differences and similarities in the perceptions of GenX, GenY, and GenZ on online platforms.
- Understanding the differences and similarities within and between generations about the perceptions regarding online platforms has become important for marketers and businesses while developing a digital marketing and communication strategy that can capture their attention.

2.2 Research Questions

- What are the notable peer-generational differences and cross-generational similarities in the perceptions regarding social media platforms and digital marketing activities?

2.3 Objectives

1. To explore the intra- and cross-generational similarities and differences in the perceptions of Generation X, Y, and Z customers on social media platforms and digital marketing activities, and

2. To assess whether an effective digital marketing strategy can be developed based on intra- and cross-generational similarities and differences in the perceptions of generations X, Y, and Z about social media platforms and digital marketing.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

A detailed survey of the previous studies on the comparability and contrasts in the perceptions of Generations X, Y, and Z on online platforms and digital marketing activities was conducted. The researcher searched Google Scholar and Research Gate databases related to inter-generational and intra-generational social media platforms and digital marketing. Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flowchart endorsed by the Cochrane Collaboration (Prayag et al., 2018) method was adopted to conduct the literature review systematically. The literature review articles were shortlisted by following a 4 step procedure (Figure 1).
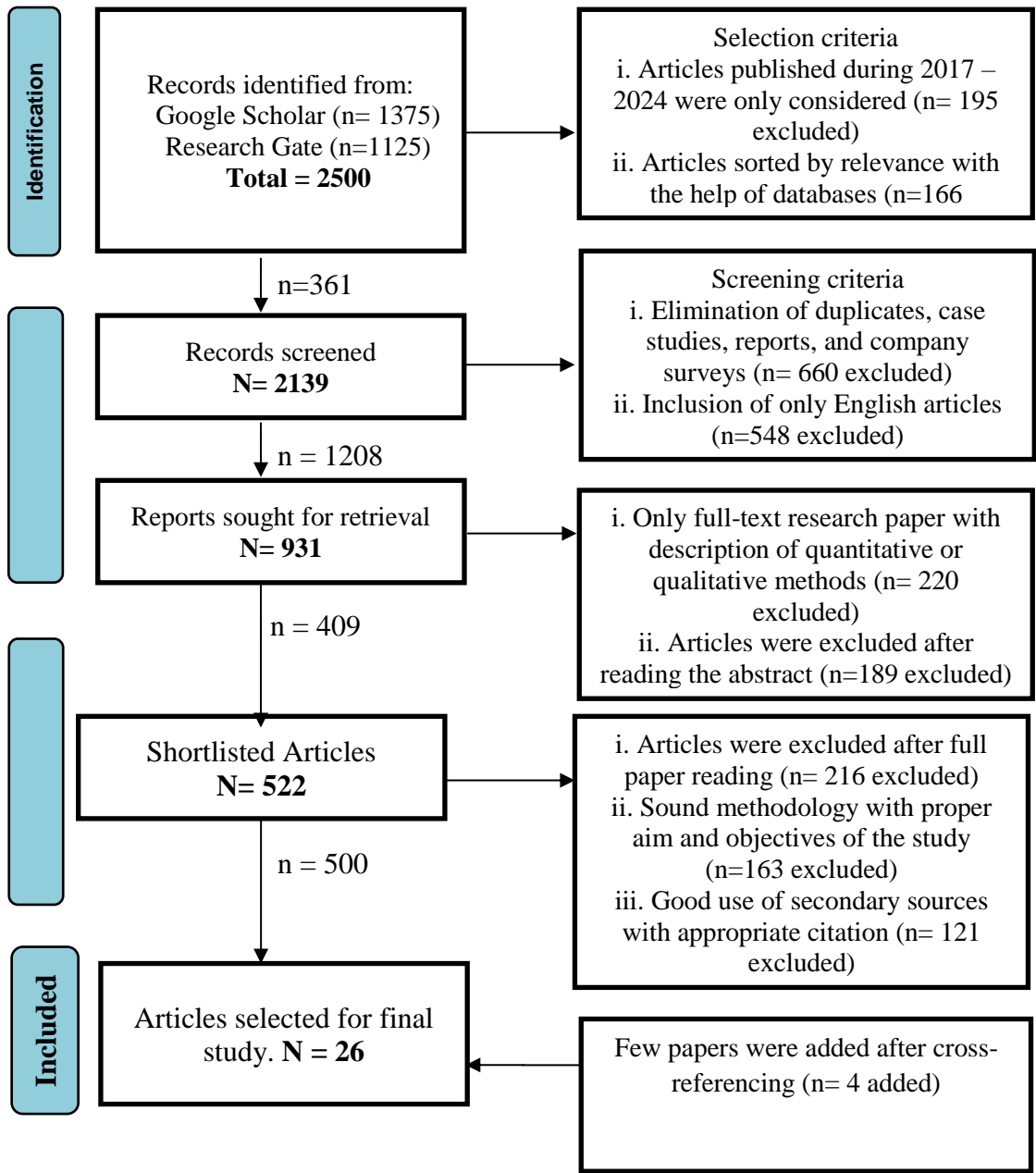
N = 26 articles

*Figure 1: **PRISMA diagram of Systematic Literature Review***

After a four-stage filtering process, the articles planned to be reviewed for the literature survey have been reduced to 26 articles. The results of 12 selected pertinent studies are presented in tabular form (Table 5).

Table 5. ***Intra and Inter-generational perception on social media and digital marketing***

Author & Year	Title of the study	Purpose/Objective	Main Findings
Kaja Fietkiewicz (2017)	Jumping the digital divide: How do "silver surfers" and "digital immigrants" use social media?	Discusses the differences in the use and adoption of social media platforms within and between different generations	Intra-generational differences exist. Social media usage and frequency differ among females. Generations can be divided further into 3 subcategories late, middle, and early. Their social media and digital marketing preferences differ.
Michael, S. Mulvey., Michael, W. Lever., and Statia, Elliot (2020).	A Cross-National Comparison of Intra-generational Variability in Social Media Sharing	Examines the intra-generational variability in social media sharing among Millennials in six nations (Canada, France, India, Japan, Mexico, and USA)	The use of social media for travel purposes varies among Millennial travelers. Younger groups use social media during and after travel and share updates on Instagram, whereas older groups do not share much and use Facebook. Mobile travel application is adopted more by the young.
Grønning A. (2021)	Micro-memories: Digital modes of communication across three generations	Examines how digital modes of communication serve to facilitate family relations across three generations.	The older generation prefers computers, the middle generation prefers iPads and the youngest generation prefers mobile. Nostalgic marketing messages attract all generations. Technology has brought all generations together which has started to question the homogeneity of generation.

Munsch, Alison 2021	Millennial & GenZ digital marketing Communication & advertising effectiveness: A qualitative exploration	To know the similarities and differences in the engagement of GenY & GenZ in digital marketing activities.	Thematic analysis revealed that the attention span of millennials and GenZ is very short. Marketing content online must be concise with proper storylines to gain attention. Social media influencers have an impact on them. Though skeptical about the message conveyed through advertising and suggestions, reviews of friends and families influence them.

Andrea, Devina., and Wulan. Asti, Rahayu (2022)	Consumers Behavior Evaluation & Segmentation of Millennial and GenZ in Indonesia Instant Noodle Market	The shift in consumers' behavior towards instant noodles among GenY and GenZ consumers is examined	Millennials and GenZ commonly use platforms like WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, and Zoom. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed consumer tastes and preferences as they are showing a shift in their technology usage and purchase behavior.
Karanfiloğlu Mehmet., Sağlam Murat., & Topsümer Füsun, (2022)	Advertisement Perception and Generations: Comparison between X, Y, and Z Generations	Aims to understand the perceptions of different generational groups regarding advertisement initiatives.	Cross-generational perception regarding ads differs as; GenX is highly influenced by traditional avenues, but GenY & Z generations are influenced by online media ads.
Christopher J. Parkera and Hsin-Yun Kuo (2022).	What drives generation-y women to buy fashion items online?	Investigates the fashion clothing buying behavior, brand loyalty, and appraising motivation differences within Generation Y women.	Emotional fashion cloth buying and using exclusive fashion retailer stores are more common among young GenY. Older GenY is buying fashion clothes based on budget-friendly clothes, and occasion-based. Online shopping is more popular among younger millennials than older ones.
Girish Mude & Swapnil Undale, 2023	Social Media Usage: A Comparison Between Generation Y and Z in India	Investigates the usage pattern of social media among GenY and GenZ	Both Gen Y & GenZ use social media for information seeking, whereas GenZ, use social media more compared to GenY for education, entertainment, shopping, and socialization

Olivia Johnson., Hyojung Cho, and Sarif Patwary (2023)	Online shopping orientations of Latino millennial generational cohorts	Examines the shopping orientation within millennial groups in Latino consumers	Latino millennial consumers are segmented into three groups' younger, middle and older millennials. Younger groups are impulsive about brand and fashion
Abbas N Albarq, 2023	Digital Marketing & Online Purchasing in Saudi Arabia: Exploring Generational Differences	Impact of various digital marketing aspects on customer purchase decisions among baby boomers, GenX, Y & Z	All three generations prefer online shopping. GenY prefers digital marketing tools more. Email marketing has an impact on GenX and Baby Boomers and social media has less influence.

May Hongmei Gao (2023)	From the Traditionalists to GenZ: conceptualizing intergenerational communication and media preferences in the USA	Provide strategies for more efficient intergenerational communication.	The communication preference differs among generations. Even though traditional avenues influence older generations' more than younger generations, online and social media platforms provide a two-way communication channel for businesses and all generation customers.
Anoop Gurunathan A., and K S Lakshmi (2024)	Usage Pattern Of Online Platforms As An Indicator Of Consumer Behavior Among Generational Cohorts	The influence of online platforms on the online shopping behavior among GenX, Y & Z	Even though GenX prefers offline shopping they have started to get accustomed to online shopping. GenY & GenZ prefer online shopping. Online platforms help brands to create awareness and credibility among the generations which will reflect in their purchase intention as well.

3.1 Strategies for Intergenerational Marketing on Social Media

In today's digital ecosystem, social media is for all age groups and has revolutionized how businesses interact with customers of all kinds. Hence, a cross-generational and omni-channel branding approach is to be taken by brands on social media to connect with GenX, Y and Z alike. Creating content and communicating on social media platforms that resonate across generations has become very important (Adriana et al., 2022).

Nuchada (2022) opined that younger consumers are influencing the online usage and purchase patterns of parents and grandparents more than intra-generational influences. Shankar (2024) stated that brands need to craft the right messages to bridge the gap between generations that can help them win the hearts of all groups of audiences. They also suggested planning and designing

marketing plan in such a way that they serve the needs of a wide spectrum of age groups and stay relevant in the long run. Vittadini (2020) suggested the need to target specific messages through diverse channels by targeting older users through Facebook ads, and younger tech-savvy consumers through Instagram. This dual approach can ensure that the product and services appeal across generations.

Forbes Agency Council (2024) noted that organizations need to explore versatile branding tactics by introducing cross-generational content that can tap into universal emotions and can have the power to connect with audiences across age groups. Curating multi-generational appealing content and sharing on social media platforms are required. Chaffey (2024) suggested that brands diversify their influencer partnerships beyond younger audiences by including influencers from various age brackets. Collaborating with young trendsetter influencers and also older experts can enhance the digital engagement across different age groups of consumers. This right mix of influencers can help organizations connect with a wider audience on social media regardless of age (Park et al., 2024).

Mauro (2024) observed that introducing inclusive advertising strategies can expand the brands' reach and conversion. This also conveys the right message of the brand's dedication to inclusivity and appeal to all generational groups. He further stated the need to run generation-specific social media ads which can help in generating more leads and conversions. Socinova (2024) noted that marketing materials must be easily accessible to people of all ages and, font size, colour and the choice of media platforms are essential to make the content user-friendly. AI tools need to be leveraged for better inter-generational engagement, like using them to customize content for different generations, analyze the preferences of each age group online, and identify trends and preferences.

4.0 FINDINGS
4.1 General
- GenX, Y, and Z comprise more than 90% of the consumer segment.
- The purchasing power of GenX is highest followed by GenY and GenZ.
- GenZ is emerging as the largest consumer segment and is influencing the purchase intention of GenY and GenX.

4.2 Inter-generational Perceptions
4.2.1 Similarities
- In this digital era, social media and digital marketing activities have a definite impact on all generations.
- Television ads influence all generations. Word of mouth, opinions, and peer recommendations also influence all generations.
- All generational cohorts have concerns regarding online transactions and personal data privacy issues.
- WhatsApp and email are used by all generations for communication purposes and YouTube is the most used online streaming platform.
- Visual and video content attract all generational cohorts and the advertising messages must be clear and authentic.

- Marketers must avoid junk mails, repetitive pop-up ads and goal-hindrance ads as these irritate all generational groups.
- LinkedIn has emerged as the common professional networking platform among all generations.
- Marketers can use social media influencers to create awareness about a product and service among all generations.
- Online shopping provides convenience and ease in buying products for all generations and they are attracted to offers, promotions, and discounts in online.

4.2.2 Differences

- Traditional media avenues have more influence than online media on GenX. GenY cohorts are aware of both the traditional and online avenues whereas GenZ are mostly influenced by online media
- GenY and GenZ prefer online shopping whereas GenX prefers in-store shopping more.
- GenX prefers Facebook and Twitter, GenY is more active in Instagram and GenZ uses Instagram, Snapchat, etc.
- GenZ is more active in micro–video platforms like TikTok, Sharechat, etc compared to older generations.

4.3 Intra-generational Perceptions
4.3.1 General

- The homogeneity of generations is questionable because differences do occur within generations.
- Previous studies have subdivided each generation into old, middle, and young individuals whose social media preferences differ.

4.3.2 Differences

- Younger GenX people have certain characteristics of older GenY and vice versa. Similarly, older GenZ has some characteristics of GenY and vice versa.
- The younger class of GenY is slowly shifting away from Facebook, whereas older and a part of middle GenY are still active on Facebook.
- Television and Newspaper ads still create an impact on GenX and older GenY, whereas middle and younger GenY are not much influenced by them.
- Younger GenZ people have started to move towards micro-video platforms like TikTok, and Sharechat, whereas older and middle GenZ still prefer Instagram and Snapchat.
- Older GenY did not have access to a fast internet connection, whereas younger GenY had this facility. This has created a divide within them.
- Younger GenZ has started to use Telegram for communication, whereas other groups within GenZ still use WhatsApp.
- Gender difference occurs in social media usage. GenX and GenY women are active on Pinterest, whereas males do not even have an account on it.

5.0 SUGGESTIONS

- GenX possesses high purchasing power, but still, businesses are ignoring them while developing digital marketing strategies.

- Socio-economic conditions, gender differences, and technological advancements have created inter-generational similarities and intra-generational differences in perceptions. Hence, these factors need to be considered by businesses while promoting the products and services.
- Though all generations live in a connected world, single online platform marketing may not be conducive. Hence, a multi-online platform approach with an omni-channel presence is warranted.
- A one-size-fits-all marketing strategy will not work now. Hence, multi-generational marketing strategies need to be implemented and studies need to be channelised towards this goal.

6.0 LIMITATIONS & SCOPE FOR FURTHER STUDIES

- Only Google Scholar and Research Gate databases were referred to for this study.
- In future, more sector-based studies on intra- and inter-generational similarities and differences need to be conducted to develop an effective marketing strategy.

7.0 CONCLUSIONS

Social media and digital marketing have become a part of every generation's life. Online platforms do affect the generations' decision-making process. In this connected world with easy access to the latest technologies, differences in perception exist but, cross-generational overlapping and peer-generational differences in social media and digital marketing prevail. In the future, generations will be known by their media usage. The homogeneity of generations is questionable because differences do occur within generations. So, marketers need to understand each generation's social media habits and outlook toward various digital marketing activities in depth before developing a digital marketing strategy.

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