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Author

Montalvo, Isabel

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Isabel Montalvo

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Abstract:

The focus of this project was to examine social media habits and perceptions by (assuming) that looking through three distinct generations, each generation will have a distinct experience and perception of social media, and gravitate to similar platforms, due to what social media apps they are currently using and what they had initially started with. By interviewing people born between the periods of 1965 to 2009, which was broken down into these three generations: Gen X (born 1965-1979), Gen Y (also known as 'Millennials') (born 1980-1994), and Gen Z (born 1995-2009), I asked open-ended questions regarding their usage and hearing their stories. What I found is that despite seeing a similar pattern of social media apps being used throughout each generation; Instagram remained a consistent platform throughout all of the interviews but not without critique. Overall, the biggest takeaways from conducting these interviews are the matters surrounding bias, specifically the "Third Person Effect," an intense desire for education surrounding social media usage and influence on children or younger generations due to privacy and misinformation concerns, and finally how social media effects those with neurodivergence.

Introduction

When a person thinks of social media, what is the first thing that comes to mind? Your profile page? A post? A strong opinion towards what social media is and has done? That was

essentially my process when developing this project, I came across this idea of social media and its use rather negatively at first, the initial title was called "How Bad is Bad?" a pretty direct cue to my mindset when I set out to ask others their own experiences with social media and how it played into their lives. But over time when I really thought about it, the root of my hypothesis wasn't inherently negative but was instead shaped by the perceptions I was essentially both fed and fostered due to my own experience and the freely shared experiences of those on social media. As a person born in 2001, a staunch Gen Z born undergrad, I am very aware of how social media has been introduced and integrated in my day to day life. But more on that later.

My methodology was not "traditional" as it did not compromise anonymous data taken by a more traditional questionnaire for hundreds of people to answer. Instead, I chose to seek out the interest of those willing to share more detailed and nuanced perspectives of what they considered social media to be and how they believe it has impacted them. By conducting 8 interviews, I chose to separate around ~3 people into designated generations due to their distinct ages playing a factor in how, and when, social media was brought into their lives. Gen X is the oldest of the groups, born between 1965 and 1979, and due to their introduction to social media being brought about between 1995 to the early 2000s (Berezan, et al. 2018), most Gen X individuals were either in their late teens to early adulthood before social media truly had a hold in the social network of everyday life. This compares as a drastic difference to the next generation after them, Gen Y is more commonly known as 'millennials' born from 1980 to 1994, where social media was born either during their adolescence or right there with them in infancy, and so by the time they entered their own teenage and adult years, as did these well-known platforms (Dwivedi & Lewis, 2021). Gen Z is the "last" generation I included in my interviews, born between 1995 to 2009, Gen Z was both blessed and cursed with the proficient adaptation of

social media into society (Prakash Yadav & Rai, 2017). By the time they were born and reached pivotal life stages as children and young adults, social media was expanding at a rapid pace with more virtual interaction than ever before. But was that necessarily a good thing?

Gen X's (1965-1979) Perceptions and Experiences

You may or may not be familiar with the title 'Gen X' but I guarantee you know them or have a Gen X person in your life because if you're a Gen Z like myself, they are most likely your parent's generation. They are the individuals who were born between 1965 to 1979, and by the time that social media found ground and rose in popularity in the mid to late 1990s and early 2000s, most Gen X were entering adulthood quickly and were most likely unable to grow up with the influx of rapidly expanding and changing platforms that their successors did. However, chances are most of the Gen X'ers that you have met or will meet know of a social media platform or use it themselves.

My two interviewees, Noel and Avery, followed a line of questioning that I asked all of my participants, and which was broken up into three main ideas. The first was a background of their use of social media by having each individual delve into their daily/weekly use of their primary social media platforms and app, and give some context as to how and why they gravitated towards those specific platforms. The second set of questions tracked their relationship with social media compared to others, which was specifically looking into how their responses aligned or contrasted with the Third Person Effect (Schweisberger, et al. 2014), which is essentially the belief that everyone, other than yourself, is more easily influenced and susceptible to believing and trusting platforms or information they find through the media.

The last set of questions targeted the content of the media they consume or are fed through these apps and what they notice when engaging with this content. The last question feeds into the curiosity of a potential future for social media, and what can be done to modify it.

Noel was born in 1963, a couple of years older than the "formal" years of the generational boundaries, but she was able to provide information that was still closely aligned with the experiences of Gen X. The platform she used most often was Facebook, something she jokes her kids (who are Gen Z) make fun of her for due to it being labeled as the "old person app." And this sentiment isn't uncommon as most Gen Z and Millennials identify Facebook as attractive to an older generation than for themselves (Schweisberger, et al. 2014).

But the primary reason for this being Noel's platform of choice is similar to the draw towards social media, to stay connected to their family and friends. However, what is unlike other generations is the use of Noel's time on Facebook. The focal point of her time being used to peruse local news and community communication, which echoes similar patterns in Avery's behavior on Instagram as a Gen X individual.

What Noel mentioned, that was an interesting take, commonly repeated in later interviews with other groups, is how her husband, who is "sucked into" Facebook as she describes, is so much more preoccupied with social media compared to her. What I learned is that while Noel "doesn't play that game" of falling for the attractive ads and endless loops of videos and commentary, she fully acknowledges that those around her age are more susceptible in her opinion. The onslaught of ads and scammers fishing for information is rampant on these platforms (Faelens, et al. 2021) and throughout these ceaseless efforts is a lack of awareness and protection for those who are not adjusted to recognizing these facades.

Noel comments that the only real reason she is more aware of it is due to her (Gen Z) children, helping to navigate what is a scam and what is content created through AI. This is not too far off from a similar sentiment and experience like Avery (born 1970), the other Gen X participant who I interviewed recounted her own experience with social media as far and few in between "compared to others."

Avery did not have much she was willing to go into while discussing social media, at least not as much as Noel, but what she is weary of and frequently mentioned is the skepticism and concern over how disingenuous social media profiles can be from "the real world." when asked why, she offered this, "You're interacting on your phone more than you're interacting with the person in front of you…" Which can be a prevalent concern for those who may have been given the opportunity to explore this wildly untapped plethora of information at such a young age, and Millennials had the ability to live through this very scene.

Gen Y's (Millennials) (1980-1994) Perceptions and Experiences

You either love'em or you hate'em but you for sure know them, because they are currently the generation at the forefront of almost every realm in society as they are currently the largest generation (Bolton, et al. 2013). But I digress, Millennial's are the people born between 1980 to 1994, which means that by the time social media was kickstarted as a growing industry, Millennials were the prime audience for its social development due to being the youngest generation that was able to use it. And because of that, it is important to hear how they have lived through the phases of social media from when they were initially exposed to now.

Millennials, if we are roughly doing the math, and if we keep 1995 as our chosen reference date to determine when the first "social media" site was operating, then approximately the oldest Millennial would have been 15 years old to barely a one year old for when they would

have first been exposed to any sort of online social networking platform. When interviewing Dannie and Sam (born 1991), and Johnnie (born in 1994), there was a whimsical feeling about social media. As they recounted their experience and opinions with Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit, there was a sense of concern throughout each interview. As much as they recounted the moments and posts with friends and family, there was still a wariness to everything that they had to say in regards to social media. Dannie relies more on Facebook than Instagram, a preference mainly due to the fact that more of his friends and family members use the platform, and while he is a self-proclaimed "non-active user" on the platform (echoed by his partner in the background who seconded this sentiment), there is still enough of an attachment that warrants his need to stay reconnected with friends.

But the need for connection and attachment as was described by Gen X more commonly was not necessarily the same as it is with Millennials that I interviewed. In fact, while it might have been an initial response at first, it was quickly outshined once I focused on the content portion of questioning. For instance, Johnnie made it more than clear the primary content he consumes and interacts with is focused on business and marketing, for him it is a tool used to push forward his own work and to learn how to make his work more adaptable. For him, this came about by consciously choosing to cut out a lot of the previous social media accounts he would use. Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok were of the biggest platforms he made an effort to remove as it didn't fully align with his own personal priorities in looking for information as much as Instagram offered in comparison (Dwivedi & Lewis, 2020) . His reasonings are to be intentional when using his profile page, and when asked why–he responded that "people like to portray an image" and when they do so you can learn a lot about "the way people move" from the online persona to their natural selves. This isn't the first bit of commentary that was said

about the difference between people online and in person, Avery from Gen X also mentioned that there is a "superficialness" to people when they create their profiles online. Something that is both purposeful for the people creating these personas…but also something Johnnie and Sam believe is easily construed by due to the algorithms intentional purpose.

Johnnie did believe that there was a difference in how he used social media compared to those around him, for him social media is 10% pleasure surrounding posts and commentary about food, music artists, and connecting with "that world" that were more leisurely focused on social media (Schweisberger, et al. 2014). However, what was interesting about Johnnie's experience is that he had a larger negative response to encountering media he disagreed with on Instagram and other platforms, around 50% of the content he sees is something he does not approve of or cares about, either the material "thinks it knows me" or it doesn't have the substance that he is trying to prioritize for himself. Always a back and forth between the moral and political disagreements (Sharma, et al. 2022).

But aside from the more introspective reflections of just personal usage, Johnnie does see, as well as Dannie, that both Facebook and Instagram are amongst the most useful and the most adaptable for their own preferences and age groups. But Sam had, not necessarily opposing, but differing preferences for her social media use, and it was in the form of Reddit and YouTube. Reddit being a highly popularized anonymous platform satisfied Sam's niche interests in a way that she delved into Reddit way more than Instagram or YouTube. What was intriguing about her relationship with social media is how temperate it was, as she freely gave her thoughts and interactions online but didn't allude to any personal endeavors, and this was mostly due to privacy concerns she had with social media (Sharma, et al. 2022). Especially privacy for children, which is something that both Dannie and Johnnie also mentioned in so many words.

With the echoes of Myspace, unrestricted YouTube access, and Xanga ringing in the back of their minds, these now over 25-year-old adults take more of a precautionary stance in the need to protect children from the information online that just wouldn't be right for them to be exposed to constantly. Whether it's polarizing misinformation, fear of predatory behavior, or detrimental trends—when it comes to what can be adjusted about social media platforms is the safety for children.

Gen Z's (1995-2009) Perceptions and Experiences

Gen Z are an…interesting generation (which includes myself), for instance Marilyn (born 2001) considers herself "an elder Gen Z," and born the same year, Charley has a bit of a Tumblr fascination with, finally, Cam being the oldest Gen Z interviewed in this research project. I'll never forget Cam's most famous quote "My inner monologue reads like a Tumblr shit post," which leads to the perfect segway into what these certified Gen Zer's consider their topmost apps and platforms. The big three for them were Instagram, Tumblr, and YouTube, which out of all, Instagram seems to be the most familiar and consistent amongst the generations—which I'll get back to at a later point.

For Charley, Tumblr is a staple her, in part due to having a majority of content on her interests, similar to the use of Reddit for Samantha, but, she likes to note, that Tumblr does not easily sell her data as does her other platforms like Instagram, Facebook or Pinterest. But one of the reasons that caught my attention during her interview is when she talked about her personal experience with social media while having ADHD (Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder), she describes it in a very similar way that Noel does—the issue of getting easily sucked into social media feeds (Sharma, et al. 2022). Feeds are a platform's way to provide content it thinks you will enjoy based on the user activity of your likes, dislikes, and what you watch and rewatch.

What "gets" to Charley, and really preoccupies a majority of her time, is the short form content that is endless. The content is usually short videos, not more than a minute at a time—typically anywhere from 10 to 30 seconds is where it stays consistent, but it is the condensed videos that can really make Charley notice the unhealthy habits she develops on platforms like Tik Tok and Instagram that have adapted to that type of content (Anderson, et al. 2023). Tumblr—fortunately or unfortunately—does not depend on that type of setup. Charley recounts with fondness of the memories of older blog posts on Tumblr focused on "meme content" and the appreciation for the longer form content "committing to the bit" as she describes it. From what I could gauge, the attraction of Tumblr for her is the content that is about her interests in "fandom."

Moving on to Marilyn, she dubbed herself an "elder Gen Z" and discussed that her involvement with social media has changed drastically within the past few years, and for good reason she notes. Despite Tumblr being one of her main social media platforms, she currently has a stagnant account for her own personal reasons. And the explanation may completely shock you, because for Marilyn: "Short-form content really sucks you in." Once more, we see the image of how social media the ability to grasp a person's attention and *pull* them deeper into the space that is carefully cultivated to your specific tastes and interests (Faelens, et al. 2021). "Serotonin and dopamine hits that Tik Tok created and now everyone does [it], YouTube shorts and Instagram reels are a big part of that I'd say," commented Marilyn. And that is a concern, if each major platform is boosting the exact same framework of content—condensed, highly stimulating, and provocative content, then it is no surprise that social media sucks you in. In short, from what I have listened to, it is meant to do so, regardless of the detriment it may cause to mental health.

Now Cam is also a highly interesting perspective, as he was born in 1998, and since Gen Z is classified as being born from 1995 to 2009, he is the oldest Gen Z individual that I was able to interview. But unlike Marilyn and Charley, from what I noticed in his responses is the way he described his own relationship to his primary platforms of Tumblr and Reddit, as well as Instagram but the description of his usage with Instagram is negligible compared to the others. He self-identifies as the "odd one out" as social media for him is less of a social connection with people and more of a resource—similar to Johnnie who was born in 1994. One of the hitches he personally faced in his relationship with social media is the act of falling down the infinite scrolling setup on most social media platforms—otherwise known as doom scrolling, where a person is susceptible to being hooked by the never-ending feedback loop that is designed by the algorithm to keep a person entertained with content (Prakash Yadav & Rai, 2017)(Sharma, et al. 2022).

One of the proactive ways he is trying to adjust himself to tactics that social platforms that Tumblr, Reddit, Instagram, and Facebook use is by seeking content online that is not supplied by the algorithms recommendations. What Cam enjoys about Tumblr is something very similar to this, by choosing who and what he follows he can limit the content intake that way due to avoiding the feed, which is unlike Facebook and Instagram, as the feed is much more compelling and vaster than Tumblr's set for provocative content (photos, videos, and graphic designs).

Now when I wrapped up the Gen Z individual interviews with what they recommended could be changed about this social media platform, or social media in general, there was an more specified response that differed from person to person, unlike the past two generations. Charley wanted to demonetize the ad revenue so that way it both restricts scammers and creates a less

overly stimulating environment for those like her who do not have much accommodations in terms of those platforms or online content. While Marilyn discussed that there needs to be stronger measures that combat online harassment. Finally, Cam's response was the most compelling, focusing on how much social media can essentially seduce those who already have attention span needs and preventing social media from being as addictive as a drug.

Conclusion

What I realized while conducting these interviews is that despite the fact that my data pool was extremely small on academic standards, I think there is a stronger qualitative assessment that I was thankfully given the opportunity to listen to from the 8 participants willing to share their experiences. I realized that there were three main takeaways from my study that I think has the potential to be further explored down the line as their own separate works. The first, being the role of the Third Person Effect, what was prevalent is how it seemed to be carried out by nearly all interviewees within their own idea of what that looked like and why. For Gen X, there was definitely an element of seniority they had to feel "not as easily influenced" as other (younger) people they know of have been, and on the other hand, Millennials seem to believe that social media influence is not as effective due to their "selective" use of platforms and content filtering. The second takeaway, the stress and allusion to better and more effective protections of content for minors, this was easily the most common response for Millennials over the two other generations. The last major takeaway, mental health and neurodivergence in regards to social media usage, especially as it pertains to a person's attention span on a platform that is quite literally meant to overstimulate and keep an individual engaged on short form concentrated content that is quickly being installed on nearly every major social media platform (except for Tumblr thus far). Overall, I hope to continue further research or reading as social

media laws and guidelines proceed, whether if it relates to children or not, either way social

media is inevitable to be seen or exposed to, and I believe that it can be our greatest tool as long

as we remain conscious of how it plays a significant role in our daily lives.

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