



## How do you connect? Comparing word-of-mouth and electronic word-of-mouth communication channel choice amongst generational cohorts

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Marketers operate within a complex communications landscape that is in constant flux as they attempt to connect with consumers in today's marketplace (Armstrong & Kotler, 2013). Complicating this task is consumers' engagement in word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to share positive and negative information about brands with other consumers. These exchanges may be disseminated face-to-face or via electronic media, such as social platforms and email (Laughlin & McDonald, 2010; Brown, Barry, Dacin, & Gunst, R., 2005). WOM and eWOM messages are disseminated separately from brand-generated communications, and have been found to be extremely influential in impacting consumers' purchasing intentions and decision-making processes (Gruen et al., 2005). Understanding these consumer communications is essential for apparel retailers as market research has shown that a majority of young consumers engage in WOM and eWOM to learn about fashion brands (Punchtab, 2014).

A portion of marketers' efforts to effect positive intentions in their consumers purchasing habits through messaging involves identifying target market characteristics, including demographics (e.g., age, income, gender). Demographics are important, as those of various generational cohorts have been known to exhibit different purchasing and media usage patterns (Markert, 2004; Fietkiewicz, Lins, Baran, & Stock, 2016). Therefore, it is important for marketers of apparel to reach a deeper understanding of different generations' usage of communication channels to engage in WOM and eWOM (Schafer & Taddicken, 2015). Thus, the purpose of the current research is to investigate differences between consumers of various generations in their use of online and offline communication channels to share information about positive and negative apparel-related product experiences.

**Method.** After obtaining IRB authorization, two apparel-related product scenarios were created that would be likely to cause consumers to engage in positive and negative WOM and eWOM. The scenarios were created based on qualitative data from 912 university students and staff and were pre-tested by 12 graduate students. An online survey was developed that included the two scenarios and items measuring intention to communicate via five WOM and e-WOM channels (talking, emailing, texting, posting reviews online, and blogging) from a previously validated scale (Dorie, 2017). Demographic and manipulation check items were also included. The survey was administered via email to a sample of 49,999 alumni of a Midwestern university. Participants were asked to imagine themselves in one of the scenarios and then rate their intentions to communicate about the experience via the various channels. Participants were randomly assigned to see either the positive or negative apparel-related product scenario. Data were characterized by generational group and differences between the groups in their communication via the five channels was investigated using multivariate analysis of variance

(MANOVA). The independent variables were comprised of generation and scenario and the communication variables served as the dependent variables. Pillai's Trace method was used as this method is robust in the presence of assumption violations (Field, 2009).

**Results.** A total of 1,205 participants completed the survey with 425 seeing the positive scenario and 780 seeing the negative scenario. There were 323 Millennials, 432 generation X, 348 baby boomers, and 102 silent generation members in the sample. Participants reported significantly different levels of satisfaction between the positive ( $M=4.75$ ) and negative ( $M=1.87$ ) consumer scenarios indicating a successful manipulation (Welch's  $t(1174.8) = 66.66$ ,  $p < .000$ ). Results of the MANOVA indicated a significant effect of scenario ( $Pillai's Trace = 0.18$ , approximate  $F(5,1193) = 51.87$ ,  $p < .000$ ) and generation ( $Pillai's Trace = 0.29$ , approximate  $F(15,3585) = 25.17$ ,  $p < .000$ ) on intention to communicate via the five channels about their positive and negative apparel-related experiences. Follow-up ANOVAs and t-tests revealed that all participants were significantly more likely to talk, email, text, post online reviews, and blog after the negative experience over the positive experience ( $p < .000$ ). By generation, the silent generation was less likely to talk about both experiences than members of the other generations ( $p < .000$ ). Participants in the Millennial generation were less likely to email others about the experience ( $M=2.36$ ) than those in the X ( $M=2.85$ ), baby boomer ( $M=2.90$ ), or silent generations ( $M=2.95$ ) ( $p < .000$ ). Significant differences in texting was found between all of the generations with a mean of 3.45 for millennials, 2.96 for X, 2.54 for baby boomers, and 2.16 for the silent generation ( $p < .05$ ). Millennials ( $M=3.13$ ) and generation X ( $M=3.16$ ) were more likely to post online reviews than baby boomers ( $M=2.72$ ) and the silent generation ( $M=2.40$ ) ( $p < .000$ ). Finally, generation X had the highest mean for blogging about their experience ( $M=1.42$ ), which was significantly higher than for baby boomers ( $M=1.29$ ) ( $p < .05$ ).

**Discussion.** The present research established that various generational cohorts utilize different methods of communication to convey information about positive and negative apparel-related product experiences. Interestingly, the current findings that consumers were more likely to express information about the negative experience is in contrast to Henning-Thurau et al.'s (2004) results, although the impulsive nature of "vengeance" (p. 41) may have to do with consumers' engagement in negative over positive WOM. The silent generations's tendency not to talk about their experiences may have to do with their views on hierarchy and structure (Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal, & Brown, 2007), where their experience with brand communications are one-way. Millennials' choice not to engage in WOM activities via email could be attributed to the cohort's need for immediate feedback, and richer, more multi-sensory communications formats (Sweeney, 2006), coupled with active dialogue (Eastman et al., 2012) and recognition through "likes" from their network (Hall & Pennington 2013). Also, both millennials and generation X have both been found to engage highly in opinion leadership, when compared to other generations (Loranger & Dorie, 2018), which may lead to higher frequency of online reviews, in line with Fietkiewicz, Lins, Baran, & Stock's (2016) findings. Lastly, generation X members are known for their need to be viewed as highly-accomplished experts, and this may lead to increased tendencies to blog about experiences (Fietkiewicz et al., 2016).

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