DE GRUYTER MOUTON

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From the Traditionalists to GenZ: conceptualizing intergenerational communication and media preferences in the USA

Abstract

Purpose: This paper categorizes the seven generations of people living in the USA with a 15-year per generation matrix. This paper presents the communication styles of five generations active as employees and consumers in the USA today: the Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials (GenY), and GenZ. This paper provides strategies for more efficient intergenerational communication.

Design/methodology/approach: This paper is the result of a multi-method qualitative research that crystallizes data from in-depth interviews with ten entrepreneurs in global business and participant observation as a college professor for GenY and GenZ students.

Findings: Organizations need to consider adopting generation specific social media apps for two-way communication. This paper unveils the communication preferences of five generations currently active in the workforce and marketplace in the USA: The Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials (GenY), and GenZ.

Practical implications: For the sustainability of any organization, it is critical to study the communication preferences of the five generations active in the workforce and marketplace in the USA today. In order to achieve intergenerational communication efficiency, companies/organizations need to (1) Conceptualize intergenerational communication as a form of intercultural communication; (2) Craft clear "vision statements;" (3) Communicate with simple language to all generations; (4) Engage in two-way communication via mass media and social media.

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Theoretical and social implications: The ongoing digital transformation has a dramatic impact on organizational communication in the USA. Applying the "Speech Code Theory" and "News Find Me" perspective, this research proposes viewing intergenerational communication as intercultural communication. Companies and organizations face challenges with managing, incorporating, and engaging with five generations of employees and customers who grew up in different economic eras, impacted by different technologies and media.

Originality/value: This is the first academic study that synthesizes communication preferences of five generations active in the workforce and marketplace in the USA. This multi-method approach incorporates first hand data from in-depth interviews with ten global business leaders from the generations of Traditionalist, Baby Boomers, and Generation X, as well as participant observation as a professor in the USA for students in GenY (Millennials) and GenZ generations.

Keywords: intergenerational communication; traditionalists; baby boomers; millennials; GenZ; social media

1 Introduction

Communication is at the heart of all businesses and organizations. Eisenberg et al. (2017) state that 70 % of the *substance* in an organization is communication. *Human communication*, rather than the building, furniture, or devices in an organization, is essential for the survival of an organization. The teleworking experience during the COVID-19 pandemic proved that human communication, not a physical office, constitutes the core of an organization. For the sustainability of any organization, it is critical to study the communication preferences of the five generations active in the workforce and marketplace in the USA today: The Traditional Generation (born 1935–1950), Baby Boomers (born 1950–1965), Generation X (born 1965–1980), Millennials (GenY, born 1980–1995), and Generation Z (1996–2010). This paper aims to provide precise categorization of these five generations, and to uncover their preferences for communication media. Depending on customer preferences, you may consider adopting these Apps to engage in two-way communication with them: LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, WeChat, Pinterest, Reddit, and Tumblr. Challenges of and strategies for intergenerational communication are discussed.

It shall be noted that companies and organizations in the USA cannot force employees to retire at certain age (55+, 60+, or 65+) in fear of lawsuits against "age discrimination." Most U.S citizens or Green Card Holders choose to retire at the common "Full Retirement Age" (FRA), the age at which one can receive full

retirement benefits from Social Security. FRA is 66 years and two months for people born in 1955 or earlier, and FRA gradually rises to 67 for those born in 1960 or later (Haagensen 2023). In 2023, an eligible U.S. citizen or Green Card Holder born in 1957 or earlier can choose to retire to enjoy the full benefits from Social Security. This means, Baby Boomers are entering FRA, and the Traditionalists have fully passed their FRAs, but some choose to remain in the workforce for full time or part time jobs. However, many companies and organization offer various "severance packages" to provide incentives for employees of certain ages to retire. Such severance packages might include forms of compensation like salary continuation, payment for unused vacation or sick time, extended health coverage and other benefits. The details are usually in an employment contract.

This paper encourages companies to engage with customers and employees of all generations via proper communication and effective social media apps. Research for this paper indicates that in order to achieve intergenerational communication efficiency, companies/organizations need to (1) Conceptualize intergenerational communication as a form of intercultural communication; (2) Craft clear "vision statements;" (3) Communicate with simple language to all generations; (4) Engage two-way communication via mass media and social media.

2 Literature review

People's ages grow, but our birth years never change. Generational or cohort differences in traits occur because of impactful events, technological advancements, communication evolvements, pervasive cultural values, dominant fashion styles, and changing social norms. A generation conceptualizes the framework of shared experiences, signature events, participated activities, common slogans and policies, popular culture, and other impactful circumstances, especially those happened at one's youth. Schullery (2013) argues that a generation consists of those born between a specified year range who share major life experiences including pop culture, economic conditions, and natural disasters. Kasasa (2021) suggests that generation labels are useful for understanding the combined experience of each generation. As each generation grows up in different cultural and technological environments, they develop generation-specific communication habits.

In 2023, five or more generations can be employed in one organization simultaneously in the USA: Traditionalists (Silent Generation), Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials (GenY), and GenZ. Some companies may have more of a certain generation than others. The ongoing digital transformation has impacted each of the generations differently, based on their *early access* to various communication technologies and their age at the time of introduction to various technology

platforms. As such, each generation exhibits unique characteristics and preference for *using technologies* in work and life and for *accessing information* via various mass media channels and social media apps. While GenY (Millennials) and GenZ are known as *digital natives* who have used new technologies during adolescence or at birth, GenX has been called *digital immigrants* because they adapted to new technologies as the circumstances unfolded (Calvo-Porral and Pesqueira-Sanchez 2020).

Nowadays, Companies and nonprofit organizations are under pressure to become trendy and flexible to accommodate the younger Millennials (GenY) and GenZ employees and customers. Schullery (2013) reports that in order to attract the most talented Millennials, Microsoft's Seattle headquarters offers a private lake, 25 cafeterias, football, baseball, soccer, and volleyball games. However, Gallup poll found that only 29 % of Millennials are engaged at work. This means that only about three in ten are emotionally and behaviorally connected to their jobs, their companies, and the brands they work for. Millennials like to hop from one job to the other, lacking the career loyalty more senior generations demonstrate (Adkins 2023). Schroth (2019) warns Human Resources (HR) managers that GenZers are entering the labor market and employers need to be prepared. While GenZers share many traits with the Millennials (GenY), they also bring in new patterns of behavior. A "fun workplace" viewed by managers in the generations of Traditionalists, Baby Boomers and GenX is not necessarily attractive to Millennials and GenZ.

Misperceptions and stereotypes between the different generations at workplace often generate misunderstandings, miscommunication, and conflicts. Data shows that the more senior generations at workplace, namely the Traditionalists (Silent Generation), Baby Boomers, GenX, might have their doubts about the younger generation's (GenY and GenZ) cultures and technologies. Approaching generational differences with stereotypes and a blame mentality only fosters complaints, derision, and conflicts. Pollak (2019) posits that the primary difference among generations in the workplace is rooted in communication styles. For example, Millennials, the largest group populating the workforce today, crave clear, efficient, and tech-savvy workplace communication. These generational differences may lead to misunderstandings and interpersonal conflict. How you communicate is as important as what you communicate. Jenkins (2020) states that despite GenZ being tech savvy, about 83 % of GenZ workers want to seek feedback and confirmation with managers in person, contradictory to most managers belief their GenZ employees prefer to communicate via social media.

The "rise and fall" of various communication technologies leave lifechanging marks on the communication styles of different generations. Mehra and Nickerson (2019) remind us that "GenY managers view email and voicemail positively but are less comfortable with email than GenX for task performance. GenX managers are more comfortable with traditional media; telephones, memos/faxes, and face-to-face

town hall meetings." The rise of social media corresponds directly with the adolescence years of Millennials (GenY). It is critical for organizations to incorporate sophisticated social media strategies and campaigns to strategically communicate with Millennials. The differences in technology preferences by the generations are significant.

Complicating matters of organizational entry, new employees have an unwritten set of expectations about the employment relationship that greatly impacts their attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. This is called a *psychological contract*. GenZers report that they could have performed closer to their bosses' expectations if they were given more clear instructions and training on the job. Lack of proper onboarding is cited as the reason that 25 % of new employees report that they want to quit their jobs within the first six months (Schullery 2013).

German philosopher Karl Mannheim wrote on "The Problem of Generations," asserting that "we are all strongly impacted by the context of our youth" (Gerhardt et al. 2021, p. 24.) Gerhardt et al. (2021) denote in their book "Gentelligence" that "generation" as a framework to categorize people into different groups by age, is comparable to such frameworks as labeling people based on their political parties or religion(s). I believe categorizing people with the framework of generation highlight the impact of certain time and events on people's viewpoints, behavior patterns and lifestyles, much like the impact of culture on people. Therefore, *we may view intergenerational communication as intercultural communication.*

It is generally believed that GenZers are "digital natives," the Millennials are "digital early adopters," The GenX are "digital immigrants," while Baby Boomers and Traditionalists are "digital newcomers." These labels underscore the similarity regarding challenges of intergenerational communication and intercultural communication. Communication among different generations at home, work and society is similar to communication among people of different cultures. I believe the Speech Codes Theory provides a proper perspective to "decode" contemporary intergenerational communication. Communication scholar Dr. Gerry Philipsen (1997) presented the "Speech Codes Theory" as a lens to view people of different cultural backgrounds. Speech Codes Theory explores the manner in which different groups communicate based on social, cultural, gender, and occupational factors. A speech code can be defined as "a historically enacted socially constructed system of terms, meanings, premises, and rules, pertaining to communicative conduct." Speech Codes Theory seeks to address issues about the *existence* and *substance* of speech codes among people of different cultures. Philipsen was considered a naturalist who watched, listened, and recorded communicative conduct in a culture's natural settings in a Chicago suburb where he named as "Teamsterville," in contrast to the

standard American everyday English "Nacirema" (American spelled backwards). There were four questions that Philipsen sought to answer: (1) the existence of distinctive speech codes for a cultural group; (2) the substance of speech codes (vocabulary, meaning, syntax) for a cultural group; (3) how speech codes could be observed and formulated in a cultural group; (4) the force of the speech code in social life for that cultural group. Basil Bernstein was one of the theoretical mentors for Philipsen. Bernstein stated, "within the same society, there can exist different social groups or social classes whose communicative practices differ in important ways." Bernstein argues that people have different ways of speaking, which shapes and reinforces their understanding of themselves, other groups, and social life (Philipsen 1997).

In addition to Speech Codes Theory, the "News-Finds-Me (NFM) perception" can be applied to the media preferences for GenY and GenZ, the two youngest generations. Zúñiga et al. (2017) state that with social media at the forefront of today's media context, citizens may perceive they do not need to actively seek news because they will be exposed to news and remain well-informed through social media. U.S. panel-survey data show that individuals who perceive news will find them are less likely to use traditional news sources. News will simply "find" them by scrolling down smartphone screens at various social media apps! Zúñiga et al. (2020) have conducted studies in the U.S., Austria, Germany, Spain, and other countries, with data indicating deleterious effects between NFM and traditional news use. NFM is associated with age, social media news usage, and other democratic variables such as political knowledge, and voting behavior. Online news use and news consumption via social media seems to be more widespread among the younger generations of GenY and GenZ.

Paul Allen, Co-Founder of Ancenstry.com states that generational wars exist at workplace in USA. Allen believes that Gerhardt et al. (2021) show us the root of workplace tensions as "a lack of understanding of those who have grown up before or after us (p. xi.)." It is recommended that we make efforts to foster connections and understandings across age groups. The world is better when people of all generations understand, communicate, and collaborate together (Gerhardt et al. 2021). This research seeks answers to these three research questions:

RQ1: What are the proper timeframes that categorize the five generations of employees and consumers in the USA?

RQ2: What are the communication preferences of the five generations of employees and consumers in the USA?

RQ3: What communication strategies should organizations adopt for effective communication with the five generations of employees and consumers in the USA?

3 Research method

This paper is the result of a qualitative multi-method approach that crystalizes data generated from the two research methods. This research adopted *methodological triangulation* by gathering data via in-depth interviews and participant observation. First, the author conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten global business leaders from 2019 to 2022 about their insights and experience with consumers and employees of different generations. Second, this qualitative research reveals patterns in fieldnotes during 19 years of participant observation by the author as a professor for college students who are mostly in the Millennials and GenZ generations in the USA.

3.1 Research method #1: Semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten entrepreneurs

"The phenomenon dictates the method, including even the type of participants" (Hycner 1999, p. 156). Since we want to uncover the communication strategies adopted in the marketplace, the author interviewed ten global entrepreneurs from April 5, 2019, to July 6, 2022. Researchers have stressed that the number of participants should be determined based on the purpose of the research. Seidman (2006) recommends *sufficiency* and *saturation* as the two criteria for deciding the number of participants. Sufficiency refers to the amount and range of participants needed to reflect the population, while saturation of information refers to the point where the data collection no longer reveals new information. Ten entrepreneurs from different industries proved to be the *point of saturation* in the sampling for this study. Saturation is a point in qualitative research where the researcher has exhausted all possible themes that the data suggest. It means that any additional interviews will not bring in new data. From April 5, 2019, to July 6, 2022, the author completed semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten global business leaders, asking them about their experience of advice about communication with people of different generations. At the beginning of the ten interviews, the author obtained consent of the entrepreneurs for their real names and organizations to be listed in this paper. Patterns and themes in the interview transcripts were searched, analyzed, and summarized in this paper. The interview was conducted for a bigger project, with the following two questions in the Interview Guide addressing the intergenerational communication issue.

– *What is your advice for effective intergenerational communication at workplace and in the marketplace in the USA?*

– *How does your company embrace incoming employees in the Millennial and GenZ generations?*

The responses to these two questions by the ten entrepreneurs were coded based on the focus of their responses, in regard to each of the generations. The interviews were conducted in English, recorded on the author's iPhone with the "Voice Recorder & Audio Editor app." Once the audio files were generated, they were transcribed by a professional transcriber, paid with a grant that the author was awarded for this research.

3.2 Research method #2: Participant observation as a Professor for GenY and GenZ

In this paper, the author shares real life experiences encountered as a professor for students of Millennial and GenZ generations. Most of the graduate students are members of the Millennial generation (also called GenY, born 1981–1995), while most of the undergraduate students are from Generation Z (or GenZ, born 1996–2010). They are the two younger generations in the workforces and marketplaces. It is common that sometimes participant observation arises from an ongoing working situation. The researcher in this position acquires an in-depth and first-hand insight into a real-world setting. Participant observation involves the researcher watching participants in their natural environment. The methodology of participant observation focuses on the meanings of human existence as seen from *the standpoint of insiders* (Jorgensen 1989). The *here* and *now* of everyday life is important to the methodology of participant observation. The aim of this research is to gain an intimate familiarity with global business entrepreneurs and their practices. Howell (1972) mentions four stages in most participant observation research: (1) getting to know the people and establishing rapport; (2) immersing oneself in the field; (3) recording data from observations; and (4) synthesizing the data gathered.

4 Research findings

4.1 Categorizing seven generations in the USA

During the literature review process, the author discovered that the age categories for each generation in the USA is very loosely defined, based on different researchers, reporters, and companies. Some writers believe each generation should be 10 years, while others used 16-year or 20-year per generation divisions. Nobody has provided

detailed explanation why each generation gains its official names and nicknames. Although there are no definite cutoff dates for any of the generations, there are certainly tendencies and common impressions for the division of these generations in corporation publications and news media coverage. It is instrumental that there is a more standardized categorization of the seven generations living in the USA today. Synthesizing the literature review and research data, the author categorizes each generation with a 15-year per generation division, providing more precise reference points for intergenerational communication. Table 1 provides an overview of generational differences in age, signature events, and their adoption of media platforms. Table 1 is compiled by the author based on generational data for general reference. Although there may be exceptions by individuals, common life experience and popular culture/media usage define the seven generations based on the conceptualization in this table. Every 15 year as a generation is a consistent measure to avoid confusion and 15 years is a sufficient time period to shape one's childhood and adolescent experience for a generation.

The author anchors the generations by defining Generation Z (GenZ) first. Consulting and accounting companies such as Deloitte, KPMG, PWC, EY have been pioneers on doing research on Millennials and GenZ, in order to provide customer service for their clients. McKinsey & Company (2023) states in its March 2023 research reports that GenZ comprises people born between 1996 and 2010. Seemiller and Grace (2016) categorize GenZers as born from 1995 to 2010 in the USA. The author

Table 1: Generations and communication media preferences in the USA.

Generation	Years of birth	Signature events impacted their youth	Preferred media	Notable positions
The Lost Generation	1910–1935	WWI	Mass media	Elders
The Traditionalists	1936–1950	WWII, Cold War	Mass media: Print newspapers, magazines	Politicians leaders
Baby Boomers	1951–1965	Cold War, Korean War Vietnam War	Mass media (TV, Radio, newspapers)	Leaders Senior employees
Generation X	1966–1980	Cold War, Globalization	Mass media & social media	Managers employees
Millennials (GenY)	1981–1995	Y2K, internet New technologies	Social media	Employees Tech leaders
Generation Z	1996–2010	Smartphones, AI Social Unrest, Pandemic	Social media	Employees influencers
Generation Alpha	2011–2025	Pandemic, AI DEI movements	Social media	K-12

chose the starting year to be 1996, the first year of the second half of 1990s. GenZ identity has been shaped by the digital age, climate anxiety, a shifting financial landscape, and COVID-19. GenZ is currently the second-youngest generation, living between the Millennials and Generation Alpha. From this anchoring framework for GenZ, the author adopted a 15-year per generation measurement, defining GenZ as roughly those born between 1996 and 2010.

Pushing 15 years earlier, it will be the Millennial generation, born between 1981 and 1995. They are called Millennials because the human race entered the year 2000 AD when they were adolescents. They are also nicknamed GenY because of the prevalent "Y2K" (Year 2000, K stands for 1000 in the USA) problem. It was rumored that computers might stop, air conditioners might cease to work at midnight when we entered the year 2000, if their chips were not updated. Looking back, we knew Y2K seemed to be a marketing strategy for the chip producers! Therefore, this generation born and grew up while we enter year 2000 are called Millennials or GenY in the USA. The generation born between 1996 and 2010, after GenY, is naturally and fondly named as "GenZ," a very cool name for them. Look further than 2010, the generation born between 2011 and 2025 is named as *Generation Alpha*, going down the Greek alphabet. Those to be born between 2026 and 2040 will be named *Generation Beta.* Children born after 2011 (Generation Alpha) are still very young, and Generation Beta are not born yet, and therefore they will not be studied for this research.

Pushing 15 years before GenY, those who were born between 1966 and 1980 are named Generation X, as X is a letter before Y. Those born before GenX, between 1951 and 1965, are named as Baby Boomers, because they were born in the peaceful years after World War II. In the years of peace after WWII, people were having good jobs and happy lives and more babies were born in a boom! Using this same 15-year division, the generation before Baby Boomers were born between 1936 and 1950 during WWII. They are called the "Traditionalists" or "Silent Generation" in the USA. Many U.S. politicians are from this generation, and they are not silent! The generation older than the Traditionalists were born between 1910 and 1935 during WWI and the Great Depression. They are called the "Lost Generation" in the USA. With the youngest being 88 years old in 2023, we wish members in the Lost Generation enjoy the remaining years of their longevity.

This paper chooses to focus on the five generations from The Traditionalists to GenZ, as they form the bulk of both the workforce and consumers. Each generation inevitably grew up with different communication technologies, and therefore has developed varied preferences for communication media and platforms. Intergenerational communication involves culture shock and misunderstandings, very similar to an intercultural communication experience. Effective communication

cross generations can be achieved based on listening, respect, and mutual under-standing. Regardless of age, everyone wants to be listened to, and no one likes being told what to do. Managing expectations are crucial as employees of different gen-erations usually have different pictures that what work should be. If an organization plans to cater to different generations of employees and customers, a multitude of communication methods via mass media and social media platforms should be deployed in order to meet with them "where they are."

"Where they are" could be exactly on their smartphone screens. Smartphones such as an iPhone, Samsung Galaxy, Google Pixel, Xiaomi, Huawei Mate, and Oppo are like a minicomputer. We can use a smartphone to browse the Internet and run software programs, almost anywhere with an Internet signal, for prolonged hours or fragmented segments. Touch screen smartphones allow people to interact virtually while socially distanced. Being present on the *smartphone real estate* is vital for a business to cultivate relationships with their customers. According to Statista, the number of smartphone users in February 2023 was 6.92 billion, accounting for 86.34 % of global population. Global smartphone users increased by 49.89 % from 2017 to 2022. World Advertising Research Center believes that by 2025, 72 % of all internet users will solely use smartphones to access the web (Bankmycell website 2023). By 2027, smartphone subscriptions worldwide are estimated to reach 7.79 billion (Statista 2022).

4.2 Generational communication preferences

Our families, communities, and corporations are made of people of all ages. Inter-generational communication creates challenges and opportunities. Reviewing pro-files of employees, clients, and customers for your organizations, you may find that they can be categorized into seven generations: (1) The Lost Generation, (2) Tradi-tionalists (The Silent Generation), (3) Baby Boomers, (4) Generation X, (5) Millennials (GenY), (6) Generation Z (GenZ, or iGen), and (7) Generation Alpha. This section presents research findings about the communication preference of the five gener-ations from the Traditionalists to GenZ.

4.2.1 The traditionalists and communication media

Born between 1936 and 1950, *the Traditionalists are also called the Silent Generation* or *The Greatest Generation*. Many of them are working in the U.S. Congress, the White House, company boardrooms and construction fields. "Will they ever retire?" The author's GenY and GenZ students are fascinated with the work ethic of this gener-ation. Although they are becoming scarce in the workforce, they are often viewed as

a *source of wisdom and institutional memory*. They grew up in a time when people communicated with face-to-face meetings, rotary dial telephones, manual type-writers, and Snail-mail. Members of the Traditionalists matured during political and economic uncertainties. They generally had a long tenure at a single job and pride themselves as being dedicated long-term employees (Galowich 2018). The Traditionalists appreciate handwritten thank-you notes, birthday cards, and Christmas cards. Face-to-face communication approach works well with them. This generation believes in following rules and respects structure and authority. They expect you to present your information in a logical manner, using good grammar and manners, and formal titles of Mr., Ms., Dr., and so on. Comprehensive respect for this generation is critical, including respect for their age, experience, the chain of command, their legacies, and their institutional knowledge about the organizations.

4.2.2 Baby Boomers and communication media

Born between 1950 and 1965 right after WWII, Baby Boomers are a hardworking generation. The U.S. Baby Boomers experienced challenges during the Korean War, Cold War, and Vietnam War, as well as an extended recession, but they also enjoyed times of economic prosperity. About half of those entrepreneurs interviewed by me were in this category. They feel rewarded by money, recognition, and awards for their long hours at work. Baby Boomers enjoy traditional mass media outlets, such as television, radio, magazines, and newspapers. Baby Boomers grew up with face-to-face communication as the dominant method of workplace communication. During most of the boomers' careers, the telephone was an important tool in their offices and cubicles. E-mail became available for people at work in the 1990s. Their drive for success gives rise to a *call me anytime* mentality, and they appreciate it when you seek their advice or use them as a sounding board. Boomers may prefer to use traditional forms of transactions such as checks or cash. They value handwritten thank you notes, birthday cards, and Christmas cards. Many Baby Boomers have transitioned toward social media to connect with family, friends, classmates, and colleagues, especially on Facebook and LinkedIn. About 90 % of Baby Boomers in the United States have a Facebook account (Kasasa 2021). Baby Boomers adopt digital communication with reservations. For cost reduction, there has been a widespread push in organizations to transition from paper documents to online platforms. This transition can be challenging for leaders and employees in the Baby Boomer generation, as they are reluctant to move completely online without a hardcopy. Their reasoning may include cybersecurity, accessibility, and comfort. The author's Millennial graduate students are appalled that some organizations they work for have cabinets filled with documents as far back as the 1950s!

4.2.3 Generation X and communication media

Born between 1966 and 1980, the GenX generation is the *middle child*. GenXers are in the middle of their careers, juggling jobs, children, and aging parents. They experienced economic recessions and technological changes from the dot.com boom to social media expansion. Xers are in their peak earning years, which enables them to save, boost their wealth, and achieve stability. For most GenXers, adapting to apps and online services is an integral part of their lives. Splitting time between mass media and social media, GenXers are reachable almost anywhere. E-mail works well for them as a communication tool. They prefer in-person meetings for important issues of finance and investment because it promotes trust and brand loyalty. While this generation is digitally curious, their social media usage tends to be narrower and less experimental than younger generations. GenXers usually do not like encountering ads on social media. According to a 2018 survey, 56 % of Xers said there is too much advertising on social venues. One in three GenXers said they did not trust any social media channels or sharing personal information (Koch 2019). GenXers are willing to adopt new technologies with reservations. GenXers currently dominant as superiors in the workforce, as significant numbers of the Traditionalists and Baby Boomers have retired (Stillman and Stillman 2017). Strawser (2021) reminds us to celebrate generational differences and highlight transformative skills from the younger generations. Brown (2012) summed this up with the idea that Boomers "live to work" and GenXers "work to live."

4.2.4 Millennials and communication media

Millennials (GenY, born between 1981 and 1995) are called *digital natives* as they are comfortable with all things digital: smartphones, computers, the Internet, and digital audio/visual (McMakin and Fletcher 2018). On April 30, 1993, the World Wide Web (www) was released for free into the public domain, which made it simple for anyone to navigate the internet (Ring 2023). The toddler or adolescent years of GenY coincide with the birth and early growth of the internet. Millennials' worldviews have been shaped by the September 11 terrorist attacks and the proliferation of the internet. They are the generation who did not start with many digital technology innovations, but then during adolescence, they were surrounded by digital apparatuses. The abrupt transition from analog to digital technologies made Millennials accustomed to adopting new digital gadgets and social media platforms. Digital technologies and social media play critical roles in the lives of Millennials. Typical Millennials love their cell phones, and the best way to communicate with them is through social media so that you appear on their radar screens. All Millennial students in the author's graduate class confirm that communicating with and marketing to Millennials needs to be via mobile communication and social media. Millennials make their purchasing decisions based on social media feedback, brand engagement, and online reviews.

They have less brand loyalty and prefer shopping online (Kasasa 2021). Their purchasing habits are based on social media interactions and brand engagement. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn can be top channels for politicians and executives to communicate with Millennials. According to research by Ernst & Young (2022), 76 % of Millennials would likely leave a firm if they do not feel their values are respected within the company, which includes diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

4.2.5 Generation Z and communication media

Generation Z (or "GenZ," born between 1996 and 2010) were raised with smartphones and social media at their fingertips. They are called "digital natives," the first generation to grow up with the internet as a part of daily life. When they were children or babies, they were given gadgets like iPhones, iPads, and smartphones to entertain, to learn, and to bond. Being *self-taught tech geniuses*, GenZers grew up in a hyper-connected world. GenZers are born self-learners. They learn from Google, YouTube, and ChatGPT! With the internet in their pockets, smartphones and social media are their *norm* for communication. They are also called the "iGeneration" or "iGen" (like iPhone, iPad). As GenZers spend so much time on smartphones surfing social media as well as going through isolation in pandemic, they might lack interpersonal communication skills and experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic from 2019 to 2022 left an *interpersonal communication vacuum* in many young people, as they endured social distancing, online learning, and isolation. One of the author's GenZ students said: "For two years, I took online classes in my bedroom with my cat. I just hope to talk with another human being who is not a cat!"

GenZers are trend-setters with media. They create or popularize new social media platforms. Instead of TV or radio, GenZers entertain themselves with streaming services such as Spotify, YouTube and TikTok. GenZers like photos and videos instead of paragraphs. Consequently, GenZers prefer image-rich social media platforms like LinkedIn, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, Snapchat, and others. GenZers have many ways of self-expressions, such as coloring of hair (green, pink, or purple), tattoos, body piercing and cultivating multiple e-Identities at social media. You might see GenZers acting "cosplay" (costume & play) with colorful hair and outfit as if they just walk out fantasy worlds of video games, Disney movies, manga, or cartoons. GenZers are entrepreneurial. Nearly half of U.S. GenZers plan to own their own business. The author often hears the undergraduate students talking about "monetizing" the projects they do or hobbies they have. With the rise of social media, as well as peer-to-peer networks, they are using new platforms to invent new opportunities: marketing products and services, creating podcasts, and launching start-ups.

GenZers strive to communicate "socially responsible" messages. The impact of eight years of Barack Obama as the U.S. President from 2008 to 2016 ingrained policies and regulations on "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)" in many organizations as well as K-12 schools and colleges. DEI applies to employee retention for equality regardless of their background in race, ethnicity, gender, age, and sexual orientation. Research shows that the notions of *equality* and *inclusivity* are important to GenZers. Most of them believe that everyone is equal and should be treated that way. GenZers are passionate about equality for the "lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ)" communities. GenZers are more comfortable with gender fluidity, and they give each other the freedom to choose proper pronouns (he, she, they) for one's gender identification. It seems that issues surrounding DEI are more salient to GenZers than in any other generation. GenZers are also concerned with issues of climate change.

4.2.6 Generational differences between Y & Z

Members of Traditionalists, Baby Boomers and GenX generations might view Millennials and GenZers as the same "young people." In reality, Millennials and GenZs are different. The Millennial generation (GenY), born between 1981 and 1995, are around 30s or early 40s. GenZers were born between 1996 and 2010, with the oldest ones just graduated from colleges, entering the workforce. The difference in birth years between the two generations creates significant disparity in technology adoption, economic conditions, and media preferences. First, GenZers are more innate with technologies. Millennials learned to adopt the internet and social media apps during their adolescent while GenZers were born into a world prevalent with technologies. GenZers are truly "Tech Natives," while Millennials are "Tech Embracers." This difference is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, GenZers seem to be experts in technology ("teenager genius") to the point they need minimal management. On the other hand, GenZers are viewed as being "addictive" to their screens, lacking face to face communication experiences. Second, Millennials are economically more confident than the GenZers. Millennials were born and raised in the more prosperous 1990s are characterized as optimistic thanks to their encouraging Baby Boomer parents. Most Millennials are now young parents with established career paths. GenZers are more frugal because they grew up in a more socially unrest world in the 2000s and 2010s. GenZers are living with their parents longer because of the 40-year high inflation during early 2020s Biden Presidency (Boak 2023), pandemic era online learning, and post-pandemic hybrid or remote working styles. Finally, because they grew up in different times, Millennials and GenZers prefer slightly different social media apps. The top social media platforms for millennials are Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube (Gitnux Market Data 2023), while GenZers prefer YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat (Alves 2023). For them, Facebook is for the "old people," including the Millennials.

4.3 Strategies for intergenerational communication in the USA

There are unique opportunities and challenges in intergenerational communication. Strategies for effective intergenerational communication can start from uncovering and mirroring each generation's preferences in communication platforms for mass media or social media. Social media apps provide a multitude of platforms for communication, each with unique and beneficial features for certain communities and age groups. We unconsciously dedicate each app for connecting with people in different social arenas, business categories, cultural backgrounds, and relationship strength. For example, one may say text messages are used for family, LinkedIn message for clients, emails for colleagues, and Facebook Messenger for friends. As a professor, if I want to get messages to Millennials in the graduate programs and GenZers in the undergraduate programs, other than D2L virtual classrooms, *GroupMe* app is the best way to go. Some of the author's GenZ students say if they get messages on Instagram, they would respond quickly. If they are messaged via other platforms, such as email listserv, D2L, or texts, it might take them a few days to respond as they rarely check messages in those other platforms. One of the author's GenX graduate students has an account at *Snapchat,* so that she can communicate as a "friend" with her GenZ son and Generation Alpha daughter. Snapchat map tracks the movement of her kids, providing a perfect peace of mind for her. To build relationships with meaningful engagement, we must observe people's preferred communication platforms, trying to be "on the same page (app)" with them!

In the United States, there are over 72.2 million Millennials and about 90 million GenZers (Marketing Charts 2022). There are commonalities between these two generations. They are more technologically savvy then previous generations, having been born into a digital world. Social media is where Millennials and GenZers spend much of their time. They review contents on various apps by scrolling down their smartphones. This is their news feed.

Companies need to present products and services onto smartphones for Millennials and GenZers to access on Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, WeChat, and so on. Selling through social media to these two groups is the logical strategy that will be a continuous movement as younger generations become a part of the business world. Both Millennials and GenZers respond to *influencer marketing.* Influencers give more interactive, creative, and authentic ways of selling than traditional commercials. Influencers serve as *trust intermediaries* for the business relationships between a company and these two generations.

David Kirk, president of Murata Electronics North America, expresses his viewpoint about intergenerational communication. Leading a high-tech company that produces parts for smartphones, Mr. Kirk says that his industry has many young

employees, who are developing the next generation of products. He says there seems to be no time for traditional face-to-face communication with Millennials and Gen-Zers. Some of his engineers are working virtually, in different time zones or at night. As the president of Murata, he strives to find new ways to connect with the younger generations of employees. He uses text messages, WhatsApp, and other apps to communicate with them while not intruding upon their privacy. "How are you going to build that modern day connection with the younger people in the changing world?" Mr. Kirk asks us to think about ways to engage with Millennials and GenZ employees.

Engaging with customers via social media is the way to go for today's business. Brad Taylor, former brand strategist at The Coca-Cola Company, says his company is probably a leader in online consumer engagement space, especially catering toward GenY and GenZ customers. For example, a consumer named *Jamal* just came inside a movie theater. Coca-Cola might send him a digital notification on his iPhone: "Your ice-cold Coca-Cola is right around the corner!" As a partner with movie theaters, Coke products are served in a special combo with popcorn, ready to win a share of the consumer's stomach.

4.3.1 Strategy #1: Conceptualize intergenerational communication as intercultural communication

Based on the Speech Codes Theory, it is critical to understand the existence and substance of speech codes used by each of the five generations in USA for more effective communication. Speech Codes Theory serves as the theoretical guidance of this paper. Viewing members in older or younger generations as cultural others, we need to be sensitive and mindful of what they want and how they feel. Dan Forsman, Chairman of Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices Georgia Properties says that some Millennials think they can be "cool and hip" because of their own ideal self-images. Mr. Forsman suggests that these Millennial real estate agents to mirror the customers in dress code and manners. When a young Millennial female real estate agent approaches a 55- or 60-year-old GenX couple, Forsman says: "You don't need to be flaunting it. You need to be very sensitive to whom you're meeting with." Jessica Cork is the Vice President for Community Engagement and Corporate Communications at YKK Corporation of America. Ms. Cork believes in the creative power of GenY and GenZ. In the past few years, she has been the supervisor for over ten of the author's GenY graduate students and GenZ undergraduate students as interns. Ms. Cork listens to these students with care as she believes these young people represent the future of workforce and consumers.

4.3.2 Strategy #2: Craft clear vision statements

Like a *compass*, an organization's vision statement *guides* the decision-making process and helps people stay focused to meet short-term and long-term goals. Alex Gregory advises that employees of all generations need to hear the vision from their leaders at the organization. From the very beginning, a leader needs to communicate his or her vision to employees of all generations and then keep referring back to this vision. A well-crafted vision statement keeps an organization on track, and unites the organization's teams of employees, investors, stakeholders toward a shared purpose. A well-crafted vision statement is usually concise in language, encompassing in scope and reflective of the organization's values. Nagendra Roy, CEO of AanseaCore says the vision statement should not be more than 8–10 words. He says vision statements, mission statements, projects, and programs need to be aligned together, so that employees of all generations understand what difference they are making to the organization. Many of the world's top companies have short and easy-to-understand vision statements:

– **Disney:** "To make people happy"
– **Google:** "To provide access to the world's information in one click"
– **Microsoft:** "To help people throughout the world realize their full potential"
– **Nike:** "To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world"
– **Tesla:** "To accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy"
– **Uber:** "We ignite opportunity by setting the world in motion"

4.3.3 Strategy #3: Communicate with simple language to all generations

In classic Sunzi "*The Art of War*," it is proclaimed that "An army will win if everyone from the generals to the soldiers has the same goal." (《孙子兵法》：上下同欲者胜). The best way to ensure everyone in a team to have the same goal is to inform and motivate them with plain and simple language. The "*Plain Writing Act of 2010*" (U.S. Congress 2010) requires federal agencies to communicate clearly in a way the public can understand. The Act states that plain writing means writing that is clear, concise, well-organized appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience. The U.S. Census Bureau (2021) only allows simple language to communicate with the general population in census forms and flyers. Plain Language increases efficiency and reduces the need for clarification. A company can unite employees of all generations with simple words toward a clear goal. Roger Neuenschwander, former President for tvsdesign advises: "It's 8th grade language and 8th grade vocabulary. Leadership communication is like a drumbeat." Communicating in simple terms enables

everyone to know where to go, what to do, and how to behave. JR Wilson, Vice President for Tower Strategy & Roaming at AT&T appreciates leaders who communicate with their employees *directly* and *openly* in simple language. Jeff McElfresh, the CEO of AT&T Communications, is humble, open, and transparent. Mr. Wilson says Jeff gains a tremendous amount of confidence from employees of all generations with various backgrounds. Mr. Wilson says Jeff is well-educated and he could show off with difficult vocabulary, but he chooses to speak in simple terms to let everyone understand.

4.3.4 Strategy #4: Engage in two-way communication via mass media and social media

The author's participant observation with the GenY and GenZ students supports the "News-Finds-Me" perspective by Zúñiga et al. (2020). Millennials and GenZers get news through smartphones, which are their "digital significant others." Organizations and companies need to be "visible" on the small screen of smartphones, the "prime digital real estate" of advertising and engagement screen. Mass media platforms are inherently one-way communication, while social media platforms are mostly relationship-based, facilitating two-way communication through likes, comments, and messenger texts. News broadcasting is evolving from *one-way "Conduit" model of mass media* to *two-way "Relationship" model of social media*. Organizations can keep up with two-way prompt communication on all media, including mass media and social media. Eddy Perez, the founder, and president of Equity Prime Mortgage says that over communication is better than under communication. An effective leader communicates with people in a transparent and inclusive way, especially when employees are from different generations. Wendy Lu, a partner at Aprio, an international accounting firm, reminds us that leaders should be technologically savvy so that they can use proper types of communication tools that fit with the situation. Each generation has their own preferences. With Millennials and GenZers entering the workforce and the markets, social media has become the mainstream, while traditional mass media is almost sidetracked. Forward-thinking companies are engaged in *social networking services (SNS) marketing*, for which a dynamic and comprehensive strategy is adopted to promote products and services at social media platforms. Companies that prosper from SNS profiles include Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Reddit, Snapchat, Tumblr, and TikTok. Most social media platforms have built-in data analytics tools, enabling companies to track the engagement and effectiveness of ad campaigns.

5 Conclusion

Studying generational trends is important, but the generational labels do not tell the whole story. While categorizing people into generations provides helpful ways of viewing them, we do not want to overemphasize generational traits and oversimplify generational differences. Within any given generation, there are many personalities and lived experiences. We want to avoid stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination by categorizing people into groups. People of all ages can learn from each other and together we create harmony in our beautiful world.

Companies and organizations face challenges with managing, incorporating, and engaging with five generations of employees and customers who grew up in different economic eras, impacted by different technologies and prefer different mass media and social media. It is important for managers to understand the economic, social, technological, and cultural factors that have influenced Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, GenX, Y and Z. To create coherence at workplace and efficiency in the marketplace, companies and organizations need to understand the five generations of employees and customers from their perspective and adopt various communication strategies to truly speak with different generations in their "communication channels" of social media apps or mass media venues.

There is no more *one size fits all* in communication and marketing. We live in a digitalized and interconnected *global village* with the challenge of people growing up in different times. Each generation evolves with different popular cultures, fashion styles, signature events and technological innovations. We need to be mindful of the generational differences and practice intergenerational communication as a form of intercultural communication. Consequently, we need to communicate with people of other generations with sensitivity and be mindful of their perspectives, background, and experiences.

There are commonalities among all generations. For example, all generations desire meaningful work, professional development and advancement opportunities, and a positive work-life balance. Continued from the trends generated from the COVID-19 pandemic, employees of all generations value the flexibility in *remote or hybrid working*. After all, people of all ages want to be respected and no one enjoyed being told what to do. In order to achieve intergenerational communication efficiency, companies/organizations need to (1) Conceptualize intergenerational communication as a form of intercultural communication; (2) Craft clear vision statements; (3) Communicate with simple language to all generations; (4) Engage in two-way communication via mass media and social media.

The ongoing digital transformation has a dramatic impact on organizational communication in the USA. Applying the "Speech Code Theory" and "News Find Me" perspective, this research proposes viewing intergenerational communication as intercultural communication. Companies and organizations face challenges with managing, incorporating, and engaging with five generations of employees and

customers who grew up in different economic eras, impacted by different technologies and media. It is important for managers and marketers to understand the economic, social, technological, and cultural factors that have influenced people of different generations. This is the first academic study that synthesizes communication preferences of five generations active in the workforce and marketplace in the USA. More research is welcome in the area of intergenerational communication.

Appendix

The List of Ten Entrepreneurs and Leaders Interviewed for This Paper

These semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted between April 3, 2019 and July 6, 2022, for data collection for this paper. The entrepreneurs are listed with the job positions they held at the time of the interview, in chorological order of interviews.

#	Entrepreneurs interviewed	Job title and organization/ company (at the time of interview)	Business area	Day of interview	Interview duration
1	Roger Neuenschwander	Former President and CEO, tvsdesign (1978–2018)	Architectural design	09/05/2019	83′ 79″
2	Alex Gregory	Former President, CEO and Chairman, YKK Corporation of America (1973–2019)	Manufacturing	09/09/2019	90′ 18″
3	Jessica Cork	Vice President, Community Engagement and Corporate Communications, YKK Corporation of America	Manufacturing	09/11/2019	115′ 08″
4	Brad Taylor	Former Brand Strategist, The Cola-Cola Company	Marketing	11/18/2019	71′ 39″
5	JR Wilson	Vice President, Tower Strategy and roaming, AT&T	IT	01/23/2020	73′ 08″
6	David Kirk	President and CEO, Murata Electronics	Tech	02/10/2020	105′ 12″
7	Eddy Perez	Co-Founder and CEO, Equity Prime Mortgage	Finance	02/14/2020	60′ 20″
8	Nagendra roy	CEO, AanseaCore	IT	04/21/2019	119′ 28″
9	Wendy Lu	Partner, Aprio	Accounting	04/30/2020	76′ 55″
10	Dan Forsman	Chairman, Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices (BHHS) Georgia Properties	Real Estate	07/06/2022	53′ 47″

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