Editorial Essay

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Gen Z’s social media use and global communication

https://doi.org/10.1515/omgc-2023-2006

Generation Z (Gen Z), also named digital natives, is the first to have been born after the mass-adoopt of the Internet, especially the social media. Through all kinds of international digital platforms, Gen Z has more access to a vast number of diverse information than previous generations.

Interconnected on world media platforms, Gen Z has become a generation doing Internet-based communication from a young age. Exposed to global communication platforms, especially global social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok etc., how Gen Z’s perceptions and attitudes are shaped by online content from all over the world is important to study.

However, either studies about Gen Z’s online media use and their perceptions of another country or comparative studies across countries are scarce. Furthermore, studies focus on Gen Z’s media use in a global context, especially news consumption, is of vital importance to the understanding of the world.

Our journal, OMGC, made some efforts this year to fill this gap. We organized a preconference at the 2023 Annual conference of the International Communication Association (ICA) in Toronto, Canada. In his keynote speech of our preconference titled, “Zoomers, Millennials, Gen X and Boomers? The News Finds Me Perception as a Media Effect Equalizer and Implications on Global Communication,” Homero Gil de Zuniga proposed a model of media use of young people. He argued that in a social media age, Generation Z, instead of searching for news, rely on “news finds me”. In addition, two panels, “Media Use and Gen Z’s World View” and “Children and News: Lessons Learnt and Future Directions” as well as 14 papers with topics such as the effects of social media use and international news on Gen Z’s world view, politics and Gen Z’s media use, artificial intelligence and Gen Z, digital activism and Gen Z, and cross-generational comparisons were presented at the preconference. See our full preconference program at https://omgc.shisu.edu.cn/8e/63/c12420a167523/page.htm.

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This themed issue is compiled from six selected revised manuscripts from the preconference. All authors highlighted the importance of social media in Generation Z’s daily lives.

We begin the issue with Diana Alvarez-Macias, Alfredo Villafranca and Carmen Villafranca’s article, “Identity, migration, and social media: Generation Z in USMCA.” It is a cross-national comparison of high school students who are immigrants, second and third generations of immigrants and natives in three major cities in the three member countries of USMCA – United States, Canada and Mexico. In-depth interviews revealed their social media use influenced their own national identity, perceptions of other countries and their interest in migration. Canadians were rated most positively among youths across the three countries. Youths learned about other countries mostly from social media posts of other fellow migrant youths.

Rik Ray’s article, “online news platforms still matter: Generational news consumption patterns during the 2020 presidential election” explores the Gen Z’s political news consumption using a novel quasi-experimental interrupted time series analysis during the 2020 US presidential election. Based on ComScore’s log data of 30,000 national sampled participants which separate social media and news web sites use, he found that major political events did trigger Gen Z’s online news consumption. Even though Gen Z audiences generally spend more time on social media compared to previous generations, all generations’ social media use decreased rather than increased during election time.

Mara Singer, Chaz Callendar, Xiao Ma and Samuel Tham’s article, “Differences in perceived influencer authenticity: A comparison of Gen Z and Millennials definitions of influencer authenticity during the De-Influencer Movement,” uses the six dimensions of authenticity for social media influencers (SMI) to compare Gen Z and Millennials and found they have different authenticity expectations of SMI: Gen Z considers SMIs as highly knowledgeable and trustworthy friends with whom they can seek advice and opinions, while Millennials see SMIs as a profession that needs to be done in an ethical and transparent manner.

Yijin Li’s article, “Why does Gen Z watch Virtual Streaming VTuber Anime Videos with Avatars on Twitch?” explores why video game consoles such as Twitch have become U.S. Gen Z’s favorite platform to watch a special type of online content: live streaming anime videos (mostly Japanese) with only narration and no real person appearance. Using a survey of Reddit users on VTuber communities to explore motivations for watching these videos and their gifting behaviors, Li found that companionship, appearance of the avatars, and the personality of VTubers influence viewers’ willingness to watch live streaming and about one-third of the viewers use gifting to express their support of these VTubers.
Zhenyu Zhang’s article, “Para-kin relationship between fans and idols: a qualitative analysis of fans’ motivations for purchasing idol-dolls,” examines how Gen Z mainland Chinese fans assume a mother role of the idol dolls created based on celebrities’ appearances to cover up their romantic fantasies about their idols. These dolls become as a new means for them to express their strong affection for their beloved idols, serving as semiotic identifiers, attracting like-minded fans and gaining community recognition in online communities.

“From the Traditionalists to Gen Z: Conceptualizing Intergenerational Communication and Media Preferences in the USA” by May Hongmei Gao is an article analyzing the features of communication of five generations from the Traditionalists to Gen Z in the USA by semi-structured in-depth interviews with global business leaders and participant observation. The article proposes a revised taxonomy of generations based on a 15-year period and the media preferences of different generations. Her article discusses the implications of understanding generational differences on effective intergenerational communication in organizations.

Our translated featured research outside the Anglosphere is Lisa Bolz’s “Co-writing journalism on TikTok: media legitimacy and edutainment communities,” originally published in French in Quaderni. Her study of British, French, German and US news media on TikTok shows how they become TikTok certified, negotiate their journalistic authority and adapt their content to consolidate their “viewing contract” with target Generation Z by participating in viral trends, publishing videos that affect the lives of young Internet users, or telling information with a humorous angle.