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Perspective Paper

The Fallacy of Marketing to Millennials: Why Sri Lankan Marketers Should Discard Generational Labels

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Abstract

This article is a critique of the application of generational labels in marketing, beginning with a review of the concept of cohorts and generations from sociology, followed by an appraisal of contemporary scholarship and thought leadership critical of generational obsession. Using this as the foundation, the validity of applying generational labels, particularly the label of millennials, within the Sri Lankan context is questioned by illustrating how the reference points and shared experiences that define the social generations in the United States (US) are not relevant to the same birth cohorts in Sri Lanka. We recommend discarding these generational labels and propose two alternative ways forward. The marketing fraternity could initiate a broader conversation involving the academics in social sciences in defining social generations for Sri Lanka or move beyond vague terminology such as millennials and engage in robust segmentation and targeting.

Keywords: Birth Cohorts, Generation Y, Millennials, Segmentation and Targeting, Social Generations

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Introduction

If you are involved in the marketing profession, ‘Gen X’, ‘Gen Y’, ‘millennials’, and even ‘Gen Z’ are words that you would have definitely come across. These have become the go-to word to describe people, be it their behaviour, desires, or attitudes. For instance, the term millennials conjures up images of digital natives, liberals, entitled, self-centred, working side-gigs, eco-centric, and so on. We wish to propose the question ‘are there groups of people whom we can term as Generation X, millennials, and Generation Z, within the Sri Lankan context?’ Specifically we will focus on the validity of the most commonly used generational label of millennials, in the local marketing environment.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Social Generations

To understand where this term originated, we have to dive into the academic discipline of sociology, and more specifically the subject of ageing and life course. It all started with the Hungarian-born sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893-1947), who in his essay, ‘On the Problem of Generations’ argued that people located in the same generation may see the world in very different ways from their counterparts in previous generations (Mannheim, 1952). This was the first strong claim made regarding the influence of particular generations on life course experiences.

The academically accepted term is ‘cohorts’ (or ‘birth cohorts’), which are groups of people who are born within a few years of each other, who share some common experiences; these could be as inconsequential as going to school or life changing as experiencing a war together (Giddens & Sutton, 2017; Scott, 2014). Sociologists argue that cohort experiences have shared cultural and political reference points, such as specific governments (such as specific political ideologies, forms of government), traumatic events (such as conflicts, famines, epidemics), and musical trends, which give shape to the life course (Grasso, Farrall, Gray, Hay, & Jennings, 2019; Rindfleisch, 1994). Sociologically, the concept of cohort is a way of contextualising the lives of individuals; first, within the specific interval of historical time into which they are born, grow up, and grow old; and second, within the company of their coevals (other individuals of the same, or similar, calendar age). As a consequence of their cohort’s location in historical time, individuals and their coevals share exposure to certain experiences and opportunities, and are excluded from others. This approach enables sociologists to understand people through the cohort they belong to and how their location in historical time exposes them to certain experiences, crises, and events, and excludes them from others (Pilcher, 1995).

Mannheim takes this idea further. Firstly, he suggests that there is a crucial period of exposure, namely, during youth, which has enduring ideological effects. Secondly, he argues that, as a result of differential exposure during youth and exclusion due to location in historical time, there exists different social generations, each having distinctive world views (Pilcher, 1995). It is this argument that is applied to the identification and creation of different social generations such as ‘Baby Boomers’ and Generation Y’ (Giddens & Sutton, 2017). Like much of the social and behavioural sciences, when the theory of social cohorts was borrowed by marketing, it appears to have got minced through reductionist thinking and oversimplification.

Origins of Social Generational Labels

To begin with, a generational perspective to understanding the world is a relatively modern endeavour within social sciences (White, 2013; Rindfleisch, 1994). Elder’s work, published as *Children of the Great Depression* in 1974, can be regarded as a seminal empirical work on social generations. He showed how a generation that grew up in a time of economic hardship had a very different worldview from those raised in a time of prosperity (Scott, 2014). The widespread availability of demographic data in the 20th century allowed social scientists and researchers to empirically examine social generations. Researchers observed, for example, that the post-World War II economic boom in the United States coincided with a surge in new birth – and thus the Baby Boom generation was named. The term ‘baby boomers’ (refers to individuals born between 1946 and 1964) was a generation clearly defined by a specific demographic event (i.e. a substantial rise in birth rates), and to date remains the only social generation clearly and distinctly identified as such. This was followed by the naming of Generation X or Gen X, as the cohort following the baby boomers (Pew Research Center, 2015). Then came the millennials, and now we have Gen Z.

Generation X has been used to describe youth culture of post-World War II, including in the book on British youth culture by two young journalists in 1964 titled ‘Generation X’, which is a collection of interviews with teenagers, in their own voices (Asthana & Thorpe, 2005). However, the publication that helped develop the contemporary understanding of the Gen X generational label was a debut novel ‘Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture’ by Coupland, published in 1991. Today, Generation X is identified by the Pew Research Center as those born between 1965 and 1980 (as cited in Dimock, 2019).

Authors Strauss and Howe are credited with naming the millennials (Horovitz, 2012). They coined the term in 1987, around the time children born in 1982 were

entering preschool. The media identified this group as the high school graduating class of 2000 or the new millennium (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Strauss and Howe wrote about this 'cohort' in their books 'Generations: The History of America's Future 1584 to 2069' in 1991 and 'Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation' in 2000. Generation Y or Gen Y was the term that was used alternatively with millennials to describe the generation that followed Gen X. However, millennials has become the accepted term.

Marketing's Fascination with Millennials

Out of the different social generations, millennials have become the most discussed about within the marketing profession (Fernholz, 2017). Different attitudinal and behavioural aspects of millennials have been identified as universal characteristics of this generation and propagated as being important for marketers to take note, in order to target and engage with them. Characteristics such as lazy, entitled, self-obsessed, generous, community-spirited, tech-savvy, or needing praise are commonly presented in the popular press (Cummings, 2017). From understanding their purchasing habits to what drives brand loyal among them, many companies have hired consultancies and research agencies just to try to figure them out. Such a fixation on a single generation by marketers has not been seen since the baby boomers, but the current obsession with millennials far exceeds the interest taken in baby boomers (Speier, 2016).

Criticism of the Concept of Millennials

Despite the prevalence of generational thinking in marketing, specifically the interest in millennials, this approach and the practice of generational labelling is not without criticism. Even though Strauss and Howe's argument was based on social generations in the US, there is disapproval of the concept of millennials even there. Reputed news outlets such as The Wall Street Journal and Fortune have started discussing the drawbacks of labelling young people as 'millennials' in news coverage (Hicks, Power, & Martin, 2017; Rikleen, 2017; Lufkin, 2017). It is critical to note that the United States Census Bureau does not firmly define any social generation other than baby boomers, because according to the Bureau the baby boom cohort is the only one whose membership is defined based on substantial changes in US birth rates. In addition, the Bureau considers that the demographic characteristics for other generations are not as distinguishable as for the baby boomers (Bump, 2014, 2015). Although the term millennial is used, the cut-off years are defined loosely because of the absence of a clear change in US fertility rates to demarcate the millennial cohort (Colby, 2015).

Furthermore, there are two interesting things to keep in mind about Strauss and Howe's thesis, which lead to questions about its cogency: (1) it is a theory of generational repetition in the US, and (2) scientists who actually study social generations do not take the work of Strauss and Howe seriously (Fernholz, 2017). Strauss and Howe's work exudes a mystical take on history, creating an elaborate and all-encompassing theory of the cycle of generations in the US, which they propose comes in four sequential and endlessly repeating archetypes. This reductive reasoning has been deemed pseudoscientific by scholars who actually study life course and ageing (Onion, 2015).

The basic arguments against the term millennials stem from the facts that the stereotypical image of a typical millennial is taken from a narrow slice of the population and that many of the attributes ascribed to millennials are not distinctive to this cohort – are possibly specific to young people of any generation (Ruggeri, 2017). Issues such as lack of agreement on cut-off years, unclear definitions, stereotyping, oversimplification of human behaviour, conflation of a demographic change into a cultural phenomenon, and contradictory findings about millennials are some of the criticisms levelled against the use of the term (Cummings, 2017; Holland, 2017). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that both baby boomers and Gen X were coined many years after the demographic event and were conceptualised from changes noticed in society. In contrast, millennials were invented years before any such changes were observed.

In Defence of 'Millennials'

Defenders of the term argue that when a person is born has a significant influence on the kind of life that individual is going to lead, their values, their attitudes, and personality traits (Twenge, 2017a). This is based on research that covers generational differences in attitudes, behaviour, values, and traits based on nationally (i.e. USA) representative samples and/or comparing the generations at the same age (Twenge, 2017b). Even these advocates agree that generational labels such as millennials are very broad social constructs that lack precision and as such should be acknowledged as large, general groupings rather than precise descriptors (Cambell, Twenge, & Cambell, 2017).

Sociologists' View of Generational Labels

How has the academic discipline of sociology treated the development and propagation of *universal* generational labels? The pioneering academic Elder encapsulates the best response, "most scientists don't use the terms 'boomer', 'ex-er',

and I don't as well" (Fernholz, 2017). From an academic point of view, social generations or birth cohorts are only one approach to understanding the life course of people and changes in society. Secondly, definitions for each social generation is a social construction, similar to ethnicity, culture and other social structural variables, representing something largely agreed upon but not firmly accepted (Marias, 1970; Cambell et al., 2017). Most importantly, sociologists studying social and political generations have more or less conceptualised generations as nationally bounded entities, with studies focusing on specific national contexts: the Great Depression in the US, victims of the Jewish Holocaust, and post-World War II Germans, and so on (Edmunds & Turner, 2005). There has been headway in discussions on global generations that might have formed or are being formed due to globalisation, increased digital connectivity, and the possibility of globally experienced traumas (Edmunds & Turner, 2005). However, even in such a scenario, sociologists do not identify a single, universal generation with shared symbols and a distinctive consciousness (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2009; Aroldi & Colombo, 2013).

Millennials in the Context of Marketing

The debate about the legitimacy of generational labelling is far from over (Bump, 2015; Onion, 2015). Nevertheless, the generational concept and thinking, particularly in relation to millennials has invaded boardrooms and marketing strategy discourse. The accepted convention that social generations are an imprecise social construct and the lack of clarity on the existence of global generations has not impeded the runaway effect of generational obsession (Cummings, 2017). Both the terminology and the descriptors of millennials in particular have become widely adopted by media and fueled by marketers to such an extent that the term has become a globally idealised construct for defining youth in any country (Cabosky, 2019). This obsession with 'generations' continues to be driven by a select group of consultants and media outlets seeking for novel ways to define (label) segments (people), especially the younger, economically attractive (Fernholz, 2017).

However, not everyone has boarded the millennial hype-train. There has been continuous criticism from prominent sections of marketing professionals and academia on this obsession (Bacon, 2016). Ritson has been one of the prominent critical voices in this regard. Ritson has argued against the homogenised profiling of an entire cohort and condemned the exaggeration of differences in this cohort from the earlier cohorts as 'nonsensical' (Ritson, 2017). Ritson identifies this as a side effect of marketers' fixation on young people, where they focus on the younger segments in a society while ignoring older age groups, when it comes to targeting and

communication (Ritson, 2015). As such, this becomes cyclical; when the current youth group ages, marketers turn their attention to the next distinctive group of young adults to focus on. Even as you read this, there is a shifting of focus, from millennials to the post-millennial generation or those being labelled as Gen Z (See Dimock, 2019; Segran, 2016; The Economist, 2019).

In addition to marketing, the other management discipline to be impacted by generational fascination is human resource management. Here again there has been plenty of conversation about millennials in the workforce and how workplaces need to be more attuned to this new breed of employees. Nevertheless, academics and researchers who actually study psychological aspects in the work environment are fighting back with evidence that employees of different ages are more similar than different in terms of their attitudes and values, and that any differences that exist are fairly small to warrant any action or attention (Pfau, 2016; King, 2019; Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt, & Gade, 2012).

The Problems in Applying Generational Labels to Sri Lankan Consumers

There is absolutely nothing wrong in applying the theory of generational cohorts to Sri Lanka, except that there is no application of the theory; just a direct adoption of ‘generations’ that have been ‘identified’ in the US. Ignoring the detail that social generations are an imprecise, fuzzy construct and that these generations have always been understood within a national frame of reference, marketers, market researchers, and marketing communication specialists in Sri Lanka have accepted without question, that Gen X, millennials / Gen Y, and Gen Z are universal concepts and that there are Gen Xers, millennials, and Gen Zs in Sri Lanka as well. For instance, within the last five years Daily FT (an English-language daily newspaper for the business community) has published over 30 stories about millennials / Gen Y mainly and to a lesser extent about Gen X and Gen Z (Daily FT, 2019). The monthly business magazine Lanka Monthly Digest’s (LMD) 25th anniversary cover story was a special report about Gen Z in Sri Lanka (LMD, 2019). Firms from diverse industries such as banking, mobile phones, consumer packaged goods, technology, automobiles, education, home builders, and insurance, have identified (in their press releases) Sri Lankan millennials as their target segment (See Commercial Bank of Ceylon, 2018; Samsung Sri Lanka, 2019; Cargills Bank Limited, 2017; Nestlé Sri Lanka, 2018; Maruti Suzuki India Limited, 2017; Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, 2017; Landmark Developers, 2018). In addition to marketers, human resource

management professionals in Sri Lanka have also started referring to millennials as the key workforce group, as can be inferred from thought leadership and training programmes emanating from this discipline (SLASSCOM, 2018; Institute of Personnel Management, 2018; Gunawardhena, 2017; Hettiarachchi, 2017; Guganeshan, 2018).

Are there Millennials (or Gen X or Gen Z) in Sri Lanka?

Even if one were to set aside the controversies in defining social generations and accept that millennials are a robust cohort in the US, there is no concrete evidence that we can identify an equal cohort in this country. The reference points for the demarcation of birth cohorts are events that lead to common or shared experiences (during their youth / early life), and these depend on geographical boundaries within which they take place. They can vary from country to country. As discussed in the previous section, sociology considers generations as nationally bounded entities. Shared historical experiences can be global (e.g. World War II). However, this does not mean that experiences shared by members of a birth cohort in the West will define a social generation from the same birth cohort in Sri Lanka.

What this means is that social generations in one society need not be the same as in another society, unless the event that demarcates them had global ramifications that had an impact on individual nations at the same time. For instance, a significant event that the Pew Research Center uses to define millennials (as those born between 1981 and 1996) is the September 11th terrorist attacks (Dimock, 2019). Sri Lankans born between 1981 and 1996 did not experience 9/11 in the same way as Americans born between the same cut-off years. Another aspect considered is digital technology – that millennials were the first to grow up with computers in their homes, making them digital natives. This is a reflection on the rate of technology adoption and internet penetration growth in the US. It is not parallel to the digital technology adoption rates in Sri Lanka. For instance, by the year 2000, 52% of US adults and 70% of those 18-29 year olds were using the internet, compared to just 40,497 (approximately 0.2% of the Sri Lankan population) internet subscribers in the whole of Sri Lanka in the same year (Pew Research Center, 2019; Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka, 2008).

The key political, economic, and social factors that define millennials in the US (such as growing up in the shadow of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the 2008 election of the first black President, and the 2008 economic recession, to name a few) as discussed by Dimock (2019), are neither impactful nor relevant to Sri Lankans who

belong to this same birth cohort. The social forces and cultural changes are vastly different, within this period, in the two countries. The same argument can be extended to Gen X and Gen Z as well. What local marketers and consultants fail to take into account is that early life experiences that define a social generation can be quite different for the same cohort in different economic and social conditions. Therefore, the same generational labels are not applicable.

Does Marketing Require Social Generations?

Another way to look at this issue is to question whether we actually need to identify equivalent or indigenous social generations within the Sri Lankan populace for the purpose of marketing. The arguments by Ritson and others cast doubt on the use of generational cohorts (especially the millennial label) for segmentation / targeting. The proposition is that there are no significant differences between the generational cohorts, similarities between them needs to be considered, while also taking note of nuanced differences within a generational cohort (Ritson, 2017). In particular, the call is for marketers to move beyond vague demographic terms such as millennials and use behaviour and attitudes as tools for segmentation and targeting (Ritson, 2015).

Avenues for Future Research within the Sri Lankan Context

To the best of our knowledge, there has been no systematic and robust identification of social generations within the Sri Lankan population. Any attempt to define such social generations has to take into account the historical events that could have led to people sharing a common experience. These could include the JVP insurrections of 1971 and 1989, the 1956 Sinhala Only Act, the civil war, the closed economy (1970-77), the economic liberalisation of 1977, and the end of the civil war in 2009. We do not have sufficient research evidence to suggest these as significant generation-defining events. However, in the work of academics, writers and social critics, we see these events being portrayed as possible markers that shaped the Sri Lankan sociocultural landscape to what it is right now. For instance, the Sinhala-educated, Sinhala-speaking rural youth who became the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and led two unsuccessful but impactful insurrections are sometimes referred to as the 'Children of '56', as they were a product of the political and social changes that followed S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike's victory in 1956 and the passing of the Sinhala Only Act (Rambukwella, 2018; Wickramasinghe, 2006.). Hettige (1998) has argued that the method in which forces of modernisation were directed in Sri Lanka after independence had a decisive influence in shaping youth identities in the country, in contrast to what happened in Western countries in the past. Terming the process as

‘pseudo-modernisation’, he describes how this led to reinforcement of pre-existing, primordial identities rather than the creation of an integrated, broader national identity (Hettige, 1998). These indications challenge the adoption of the same generational labels as the West. Furthermore, the seminal work on profiling Sri Lankan consumers by Liyanage (2009, 2010) is a remarkable example of this premise. Using a sociological approach to explain the development of what he coined as the ‘post-modern Sri Lankan consumer’, he pinpointed three epochs: pre-1956, post-1956, and post-1977, and articulated the impacts of traditionalisation, modernisation, and postmodernisation in creating the unique nature of Sri Lankan consumers that challenged the local marketer (Liyanage, 2009, 2010). We believe these are avenues that require exploration through research.

Some Concluding Thoughts

There are two, somewhat interrelated, ways forward for the Sri Lankan marketing fraternity – the practitioners, researchers, communicators, and consultants. One is that they could work on identifying generational markers and descriptors for Sri Lanka – independent of the fuzzy, misleading work that is coming out of the US and the rest of the global arena. This means defining social generations that are based on more relevant demographic, historical, and social trends. More research, especially in partnership with academics from other social sciences, will be required if this path is chosen. The alternative is to move beyond broad generational segments and engage in robust segmentation and targeting, making use of behavioural and attitudinal data.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

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