

THE RELEVANCE OF GENERATIONAL THEORY IN BRAND COMMUNICATION

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Abstract. *This paper examines the use of generational theory in marketing, brand, and design strategies. It shows how this approach helps to identify differences in audience behavior, media habits, and communication styles. However, it also highlights the risk of oversimplifying audience analysis and creating stereotypical perceptions. Therefore, generational theory should be combined with deeper research into real audience needs and context.*

Keywords: *generational theory, marketing, consumer behavior, audience analysis, brand strategy, stereotypes.*

In recent years, generational categories such as Gen Z, Gen Y, and Gen X have become increasingly visible in media discourse. Moreover, these days it is widely used in marketing, branding, and design strategies.

Originally this terminology was used in 1991 by William Strauss and Neil Howe in their book “Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069”, and later, in 1997, they expanded the concept in their work “The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy”. Today their ideas are known as generation theory. According to this theory, people who belong to the same generation share common historical, social, cultural, and technological experiences, which shape their values, behavior, communication habits, and perception of information. The generational classification is based on birth years and includes the following cohorts: the Silent Generation (1928-1945), Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Millennials or Generation Y (1981-1996), Generation Z (1997-2012), and Generation Alpha (2013-present). This classification is applied in marketing and visual communication as a new form of demographic segmentation, as it is believed to reflect differences in digital experience, media consumption, values, and behavior patterns among audiences.

At first glance, it seems to be a reasonable methodology: each generation has its own preferences in social media usage, content consumption, and specific language. It is important for those who take part in content creation to understand these differences in order to communicate with the target audience in a manner that would not create any difficulties in decoding the brand message. As an example of this approach, Apple and its advertising campaign for the new MacBook Neo model (2026) can be mentioned. To engage a Generation Z audience, besides using traditional promotion channels, Apple created a series of unique content that was posted exclusively on TikTok (Fig. 1). This content is characterized by bright colors, dynamic visuals, and a whimsical storyline, which is in complete contrast to classic Apple minimalism, clarity, and a strong focus on product features.

However, the implementation of generation theory into marketing and brand strategies is considered to be quite controversial. The problem is that it gives only a superficial understanding of audience pains, needs, and goals, often in the form of labels,

which make the perception of the audience stereotypical. It means that for some marketers and those who contribute to visual brand communication, relying on this approach, modern young people are less likely to make significant purchases not because the modern economic and political situation are unstable, and it is hard to make a financial commitment, so they prefer investing in experiences such as traveling, hobbies, and different activities, but simply because of the label “Gen Z is irresponsible”. As a result, they create their products without really understanding who their target audience is.

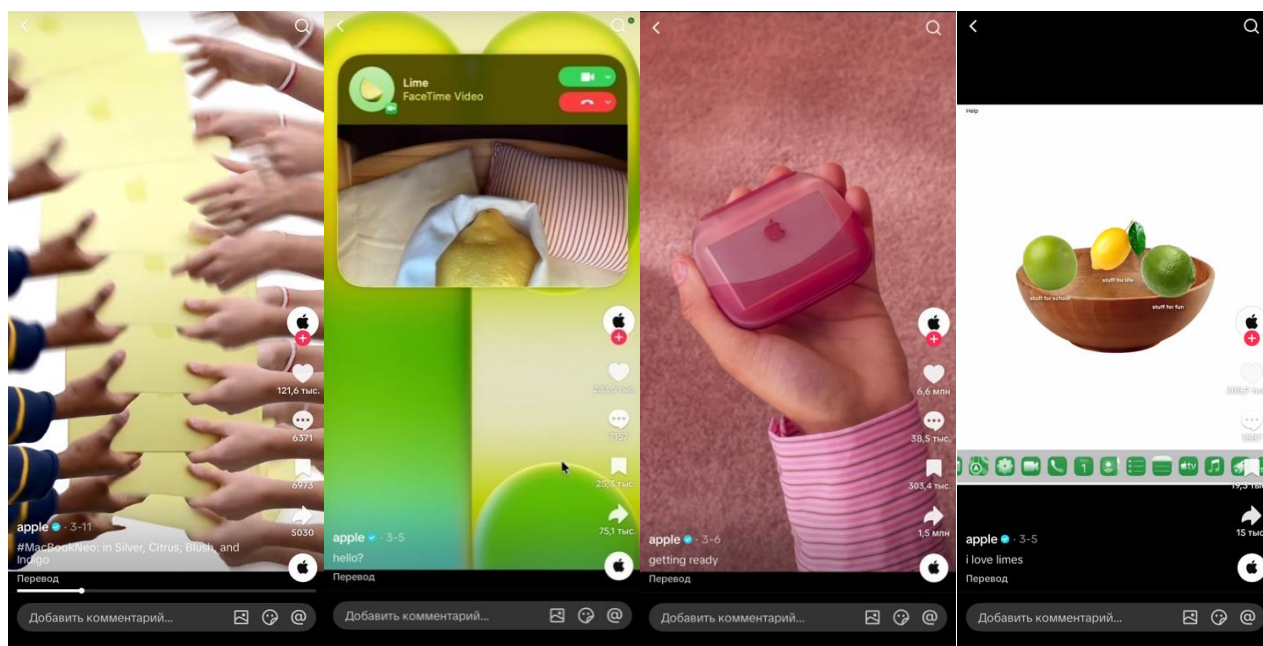


Figure 1 – MacBook Neo marketing campaign on official Apple TikTok account
https://www.tiktok.com/@apple?_r=1

Also, according to Strauss and Howe a generation is shaped by common formative experiences influenced by external factors and major socio-economic events. These experiences may create common traits among its members; however, it is important to understand that they are not consistent, and across different regions they may vary.

For example, Millennials in the United States grew up in an atmosphere of economic growth, rapid digitalization, and the rise of social media, which contributed to a more flexible and experience-oriented mindset. In contrast, Millennials in Eastern Europe were influenced by very different conditions, such as the crisis caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the transition to a market economy, and periods of economic instability. As a result, they may be more risk-averse, financially cautious, and focused on stability.

However, generational experience is not the only factor that shapes behavior; situational and emotional factors also play a significant role. According to Robert Sapolsky (2015), stress is based on universal biological mechanisms, meaning that negative emotions can affect people across different age groups, not only during the formative period of a generation. For instance, in unstable conditions, serious and expensive purchases may be associated with anxiety, because people are less confident about the future and less ready to make long-term financial commitments.

For brands, this means that their customers may compensate for this uncertainty through smaller and more accessible purchases, which provide quicker emotional satisfaction and a sense of control. In this context, bright, dynamic, and visually expressive design can become especially effective, because it strengthens this immediate emotional response and makes the product feel more desirable, uplifting, or rewarding. Thus, visual communication becomes not only a tool for attracting attention, but also a mechanism of emotional regulation for the audience (Fig. 2-3).

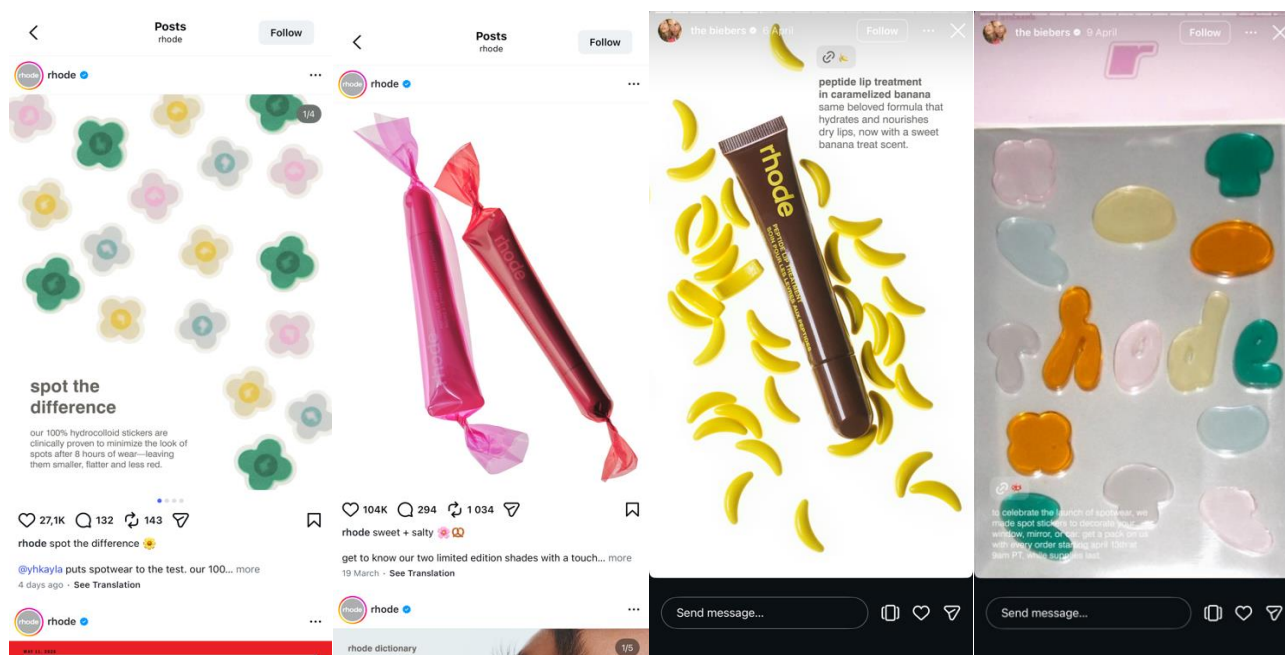


Figure 2 – Rhode visual communication on Instagram
<https://www.instagram.com/rhode?igsh=MXZodDhvcHlrYTNIbg==>

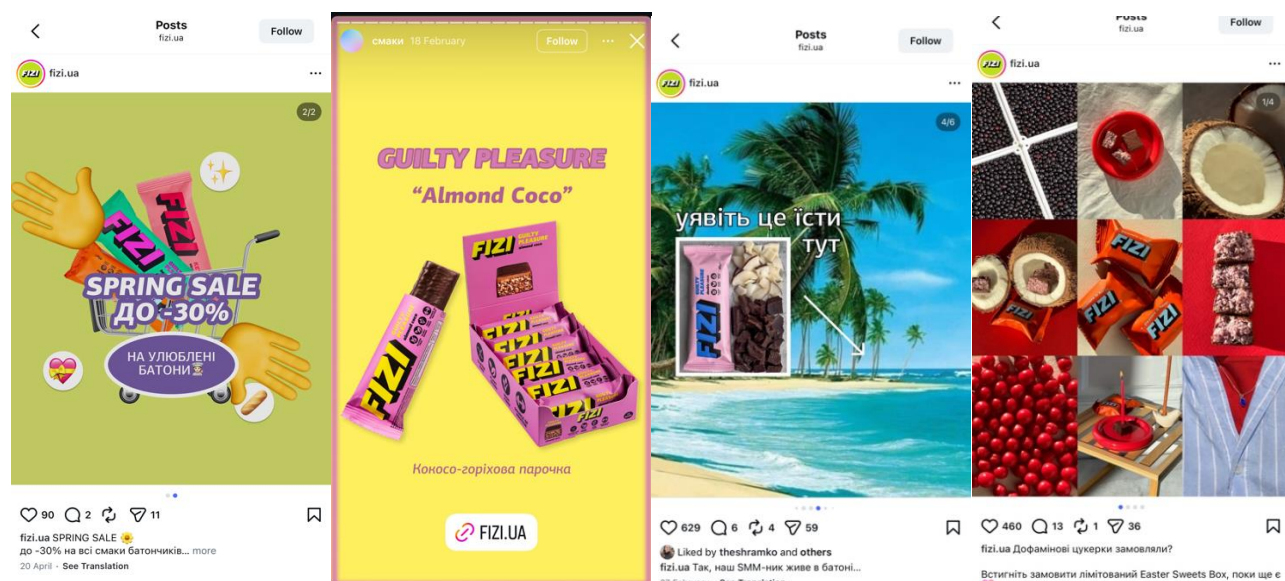


Figure 3 – FIZI visual content on Instagram
<https://www.instagram.com/fizi.ua?igsh=MTJ3a2c5bnF5ZTd4dQ==>

As the result, consumer behavior should not be explained only through generational labels; brands should also consider the emotional state of the audience, economic instability, and the psychological role that design plays in purchase decisions.

In conclusion, generation theory can be a useful tool for marketing, branding, and design strategies, because it helps to notice general differences in media habits, values, and communication styles. However, it should not be used as the only method of audience analysis. Real consumer behavior is shaped not only by age or generation, but also by social context, economic situation, personal experience, and emotional state. Therefore, the most effective approach is to use generational theory as a starting point, but combine it with deeper research of the audience's real needs, motivations, and conditions.

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