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Social Media Usage Across Generations: Evidence from North Macedonia

Lumturije Mehmedi-Sinani

Abstract

Social media is now integrated part of every life for most of us, yet people from different generations engage and interact differently with these platforms. It is very important to understand these differences for researchers, business professionals and policy makers. This paper examines the social media patterns of use present among Generation Y (born in 1981-1996) and Generation Z (born in 1997-2012) in North Macedonia. The study investigates generational differences in time spent on social media and platform preferences. Data is gathered from 574 participants and analyzed through Pearson's Chi-Square tests and the results show statistically significant differences between the two generations at the level of $p < 0.001$. The results are interpreted using key theoretical frameworks, including Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Honeycomb Framework of social media. Generation Z spends more time on social media on daily basis while Generation Y use of social media is shorter and more moderated. Regarding the platform preferences Generation Y shows a stronger preference for Instagram and Facebook, while Generation Z mostly uses Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat. Instagram is the most popular and most used platform across both generations. This paper contributes to empirical evidence on generational social media use in North Macedonian context as an area that remains underrepresented in the existing literature.

Keywords: Social media, Generation Y, Generation Z, platform preference, North Macedonia

Introduction

Social media has become central part of everyday life for a lot of people and it influences how people communicate, gather information and interact with each other. The development of technology and the increased use of smartphones, has given users the possibility to stay connected on social media all the time. The increasing use of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the way people communicate, share information and present themselves to the world. In North Macedonia in October 2025, there have been 1.03 million social media users that equals to around 56% of the population (Kemp, 2026).

McCrindle (2014) notes that there have never been so many generations coexisting simultaneously in families, schools, workplaces and markets. This makes generational analysis more relevant than ever, as generations differ not only in age but also in the values, use of technology and the cultural experiences that have shaped them, resulting in different patterns of social media use (McCrindle, 2014).

Generational differences in social media use have been researched but empirical evidence from North Macedonia remains limited. Most existing studies have been conducted in places that differ from North Macedonia in social, cultural, economic and technological factors. Since these factors are important as they can shape how generations engage with the social media, findings from other contexts cannot be generalized for North Macedonia. This paper examines how Generation Y and Generation Z in North Macedonia differ in their social media usage behaviour focusing on two key dimensions; the amount of time they spend on social media each daily and the specific platforms they choose to use. The study focuses on two hypotheses; there is a significant difference between Generation Y and Z in the time spent in social media daily and there is a difference between Generation Y and Z in the social media platforms they use.

The study is grounded in theorical frameworks and is based on data from 574 respondents which were analyzed using Pearson's Chi-Squared statistics.

Defining Social Media

Social media is an umbrella term that has been defined in multiple ways. Fuchs (2014) describes it as platforms and applications that enable users to create and share content and to participate in social networking (Fuchs, 2014). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010 p.61) offer a technology-centred definition, and they defined the

social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content". Boyd and Ellison (2007) have focused on the structural features of social network sites, defining them as web-based services that has allowed individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, to articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and to view their list of connections and those made by others within the system. While these definitions are useful, they all reflect different disciplinary perspective, with Fusch focusing on participation, Kaplan and Haenlein focus on technology, Boyd focus on structure which suggest that none of the definitions fully captures the complexity of social media.

Boyd (2014) later expanded this conception to include social network sites, video sharing sites, blogging and microblogging platforms and related tools that allow participants to create and share content. This definition is more suitable for the purposes of this study as it includes the diverse of platforms that can be used from participants. Lipschultz (2020) highlights the importance of smartphone technology on the popularisation of social media and notes that the majority of social interactions on these platforms happen on mobile devices.

Baym (2010) points the complexity of social media and raises lots of questions as we try to understand them, such as their place in our lives, their consequences for our personalities and relationships with others. This complexity gives the need to study and analyze the social media behavior considering multidimensional approach and supports the focus of this study on both time spent and platform preferences as two distinct dimensions of social media use.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks provide a base to understand how different generations use social media. Among these, the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973) and the Honeycomb Framework (Kietzmann et al., 2011) are particularly useful for analysing why Generation Y and Generation Z differ in their platform preferences and usage patterns for social media.

Uses and Gratifications Theory explains that people choose media based on what they need or want (Katz, et al., 1973). Although originally developed in 1973, the theory has relevance in social media contexts as more recent studies have confirmed that different generations seek for platform based on their motivational

needs (Hallinan et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2023). In terms of social media, it is suggested that different generations use different platforms because they are looking for different things, not just because they know them better (Hallinan et al., 2023).

The Honeycomb Framework, was developed by Kietzmann et al. (2011) and it provides a structured analytical framework through which social media platforms can be compared. They used seven functional building blocks; identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation and groups, to analyze the critical dimensions of user experience in different platforms. Kietzmann et al. (2011) pointed that every platform is based on different blocks depending on what it offers to users, so understanding on what is emphasized helps explain why people prefer certain platforms for certain needs. While the framework has introduced in 2011, its analytical value has been confirmed as the building blocks can explain specific observed behaviors across studies (Kullolli & Trebicka, 2023). For instance, if you are interested in posting photos and sharing moments you will be interested in platform focused on visual sharing and real-time presence. If you are interested in career development and networking you will be focused on platform that is based on professional identity and reputation (Kietzmann et al., 2011). The Honeycomb Framework in this study is used to analyze users behavior and when we used it to the generational research, this framework is particularly useful. Accordingly, we can expect that if Generation Y and Generation Z have different motivation for using the social media, like suggested by Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973), they are naturally are going to choose platforms whose dominant building blocks best match their needs.

Generational Cohorts: Generation Y and Generation Z

The concept of a generation in biological terms has traditionally been defined as the average time between the birth of parents and the birth of their children, approximately 20-25 years (McCrindle, 2014). Howe et al. (2000) have given a sociological definition and have described a generation as a group of people who share a time and place in history that makes them a collective character. McCrindle has defined generations as united by age and life stage, conditions and technology, events and experiences. In this context, generations are defined as a group of people born in the same era, shaped and influenced by the same times.

For the purposes of this study in the classification of generations is used the classification proposed by Pew Research Center; Generation Y (also known as Millennials)

refers to individuals born between 1981 and 1996, while Generation Z refers to those born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019). It must be acknowledged that generational classification is not an exact science and that boundaries and labels vary across countries, so variation within age of each cohort can be considerable.

McCrindle (2014) finds differences between the two generations we are analyzing. Generation Y grew up without technology but learned it as that came into their life, so they are digitally literate yet remember a world before internet. Generation Z on the other hand, was born into a fully digital world. Also, as McCrindle (2014) explains that Generation Z is the most carefully raised and supported generation. They have grown up with structured lifestyles, started formal education earlier and have been strongly influenced by technology, which shaped their everyday activities. These formative differences also carry implications for communication styles. Raslie (2021) finds both similarities and differences between Generation Y and Generation Z in their communication styles. Both generations share a preference for group work and face to face communication but Generation Z tends to expect more instantaneous feedback than Generation Y. This difference in communication expectation is directly important to social media usage, as platforms that offer real time interactions such as TikTok or Instagram stories may be more preferred by Generation Z.

The impact of technology in shaping generations is emphasized from different authors. The generational difference may be understood in light of the fact that Generation Z grew up with digital media as integrated part of their socialisation, giving them different developmental experiences compared to previous generations (Bassiouni & Hackley, 2014). Technology is the most important factor that has influenced the characteristics of Generation Z (Lev, 2021). Also, McCrindle (2014) notes that other factors such as music, fashion, politics and gender relations, which are part of important moments in different time periods have an influence on shaping these generations**.**

The literature review above highlights that Generation Y and Generation Z differ in their relationship with technology, communication style and digital socialization. Based on the theoretical frameworks and evidence reviewed, the hypotheses of this study; Generation Y and Generation Z differ significantly in both the time they spend on social media daily (H1) and the platforms they choose to use (H2) are tested through the methodology outlined in the following section.

Methodology

The study used a quantitative survey design. Data was collected from 574 participants from North Macedonia, 216 individuals from Generation Y and 358 from Generation Z. Generation was determined in accordance with the Pew Research Center classification (Dimock, 2019). Generation Y includes individuals born from 1981 to 1996 and Generation Z includes those born from 1997 to 2012.

Participants were asked to tell the average number of hours they spend on social media per day and also the primary social media platform they use. Responses of the question on hours use of social media were grouped into five categories; less than 1 hour, 1-2 hours, 3-5 hours, 5-7 hours and more than 7 hours. Responses to the question on primary platform use were categorized into five platforms; Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat and TikTok.

Pearson's Chi-Square test (χ^2) was used to determine whether observed differences in social media usage time and platform preferences between the two generations were statistically significant. The analyses were conducted on the full sample of 574 respondents.

Findings

Time Spent on Social Media Daily

Table 1 shows the distribution of daily social media usage time by generations.

Table 1.

Daily hours spent on social media by generation. Pearson's Chi-Square $\chi^2(4) = 80.84$, $p < 0.001$

Hours on Social Media	Generation Y (number)	Generation Y (percentage)	Generation Z (number)	Generation Z (percentage)
Less than 1 hour	26	12.0%	16	4.5%
1–2 hours	114	52.8%	87	24.3%
3–5 hours	64	29.6%	162	45.2%
5–7 hours	8	3.7%	58	16.2%
More than 7 hours	4	1.9%	35	9.8%
Total	216	100%	358	100%

The data shows clear differences in intensity of usage for the two generations. The most common response category for Generation Y is 1-2 hours per day, accounting for 52.8% (114 of 216) of respondents. Generation Z shows different results, the largest group of respondents with 45.2% (162 of 358) falls in the 3-5 hours category, a further 16.2% (58 of 358) spend 5-7 hours and 9.8% (35 of 358) of respondents reported to spent more than 7 hours per day on social media. In total, data showed that 71.2% (255 respondents of 358) of Generation Z respondents use social media for more than 3 hours per day, compared to only 35.2% (76 of 216) of Generation Y respondents.

Pearson's Chi-Square test result confirms that the difference in usage time between the two generations is statistically significant ($\chi^2(4) = 80.84$, $p < 0.001$). Generation Z shows tendency toward more intensive social media usage. This finding is consistent with the status of generation Z grown up entirely within the digital ecosystem (McCrindle, 2014; Lev, 2021).

Social Media Platform Preferences

Table 2 presents the distribution of responses to primary platform preferences by generation

Table 2.

Primary social media platform by generation. Pearson's Chi-Square: $\chi^2(4) = 168.71$, $p < 0.001$

Platform	Generation Y (number)	Generation Y (percentage)	Generation Z (number)	Generation Z (percentage)
Facebook	71	32.9%	12	3.4%
Instagram	127	58.8%	167	46.5%
LinkedIn	6	2.8%	2	0.6%
Snapchat	5	2.3%	59	16.5%
TikTok	7	3.2%	118	33.0%
Total	216	100%	358	100%

According to the results, Instagram is the most widely used platform across both generations but, its use is noticed to be higher among Generation Y (58.8%) compared to Generation Z (46.5%). Facebook is reported to be used by 32.9% (71 participants) of the participants from Generation Y. On the other hand, only 3.4% (12 participants) from Generation Z respondents reported to use Facebook as primary

social media platform. TikTok is the platform of choice for 33 % (118) of Generation Z respondents and only 3.2% of Generation Y respondents (7 participants). For Snapchat it is noticed a similar pattern, with 16.5% (59) of Generation Z users and only 2.3% (5) of Generation Y users. LinkedIn is among the least used platforms across both generations. This data reflect a clear generational difference in platform preference for these two generations.

The Chi-square test shows significant result ($\chi^2(4) = 168.71$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that there is statistical significant difference on the social media platform preference between Generation Z and Generation Y.

Discussion

The findings of this study for North Macedonia are in line with other existing international findings in the literature on generational differences in social media behaviour. Generation Z spends more time in social media and this is consistent with McCrindle's (2014) characterisation of this generation that has grown up in a fully digital world and social media platform are normal part of their everyday life. Having used the internet from early childhood (Bassiouni & Hackley, 2014), Generation Z members have integrated social media into every aspect of their daily lives, from social interaction, entertainment, learning and self-expression. This is showed clearly in the data, where 45.2% of Generation Z respondents report using social media for 3–5 hours daily, and a further 26% for more than 5 hours, compared to 52.8% of Generation Y respondents who report usage of only 1–2 hours per day.

These findings are consistent and with recent empirical evidence from other contexts. Șchiopu et al. (2023) found similar patterns in Romania, where Generation Z showed a median daily usage of 3-5 hours compared to 1-3 hours for Generation Y. Similarly, Sharma et al. (2023) reported significantly higher social media usage among Generation Z compared to Generation Y in their sample.

The platform preferences found in this study broadly align with comparable regional research, though with some differences. Șchiopu et al. (2023) found Facebook dominant among Romanian Generation Y (98.2%) and Instagram leading for Generation Z (83%), a similar generational split to what was observed here, though Millennial Facebook usage in North Macedonia was considerably lower (32.9%), likely reflecting local context and differences in how platform preference was measured. The strong Gen Z lean toward TikTok and Snapchat is consistent with Kullolli

and Trebicka (2023) and Akbuğa (2025), both of whom found that younger users across Albania and Turkey gravitate toward fast, visual platforms driven by identity expression and social engagement.

The way and time using social media can also be understood through the lens of Uses and Gratifications Theory, which suggests that people actively choose media based on the needs they seek to fulfil (Katz et al., 1973). In this line, Hallinan et al. (2023) found that younger users show stronger preference in entertainment and games content on social media, while older users show preference toward topics that cover family, politics and inspiration. The findings of this study reflect a similar pattern, with Generation Z reporting higher daily social media usage and a wider range of platforms used, suggesting that the two generations approach social media with different motivations and needs.

The difference on the platform preferences for the two generations we have analysed is particularly revealing. The biggest difference in finding concerns Facebook, which was used by 32.9% of Generation Y respondents, but only 3.4% of Generation Z, indicating a sharp generational difference in platform preference. Similarly, TikTok and Snapchat show strong dominance among Generation Z, with 33.0% and 16.5% usage respectively, compared to just 3.2% and 2.3% among Generation Y.

The dominance of TikTok and Snapchat among Generation Z reflects the preference for fast, visual content that disappears quickly and is tailored to their interests. Through the lenses of Honeycomb Framework Kietzmann et al (2011), these platforms can be seen as prioritising the sharing and presence building blocks, allowing users to broadcast moments instantly and engage with algorithmically matched content. Facebook by contrast, appears to built around relationships and groups, which appeals more to Generation Y, a cohort that was already socially connected before mobile social media took over.

LinkedIn shows limited use as a primary platform across both generation with only 2.8% of Generation Y and 0.6% of Generation Z reporting its use. This might be explained with the fact that part of Generation Z are still students or at early stage of entering the job market, so their focus and need is not linked to professional networking social media platform. However, Akbuğa (2025) notes that career planning is increasingly becoming a motivation to Generation Z social media use and this suggests that use of Linked for this generation might grow as they enter the workforce.

Among all platforms, Instagram shows the strongest appeal across both generations in this study. As a platform that combines visual sharing with social networking features, Instagram appears to bridge the gap between the two generations. This is consistent with the findings of Schiopu et al. (2023) that found Instagram to be the platform used from different generation in Romania and with Kullolli and Trebicka (2023) who identifies Instagram as central to Generation Z digital expression. However, Generation Z higher use rate of Instagram observed in this study suggests that this platforms videocentric features, such as reels and stories, may be particularly appealing to younger generations.

Conclusion

This paper has presented empirical evidence on generational differences in social media usage in North Macedonia. Based on data from 574 respondents, two main conclusions emerged. First, Generation Z spends significantly more time on social media compared to Generation Y; 71.2% of Generation Z respondents report spending over three hours daily on these platforms, compared with 35.2% of Generation Y respondents. Second, these two generations prefer to use different platforms, Generation Y favours toward Instagram and Facebook, while most participants from Generation Z have reported to prefer to uses Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat.

The findings of the study carry several practical implications for North Macedonia and similar contexts. For marketers and advertisers, the findings show that platform of social media should be tailored to the target audience. Campaigns that target Generation Y may be more effective on Instagram and Facebook while those for Generation Z should prioritize TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat. For media educators, the significant difference in daily time spent on social media between the two generations shows the need for generation specific digital literacy programs, especially for Generation Z who reported considerably higher use of social media and might be more exposed to risk linked to excessive social media usage.

This study relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias. While respondents can reliably identify their platform preferences, self reported time of daily usage may not precisely reflect actual behaviour, as participants were not required to verify their responses on objective screen time data from their devices. Future studies could conduct the same research in other countries to allow for wider comparisons and use interview-based approaches to better understand how social media habits change across generations and over time.

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