

Age and Susceptibility to Social Media Marketing: A Comparative Study of Teenagers and Adults

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the development and content of digital marketing, and how differently each age demographic reacts to it. With the emergence of web development, more users became aware of the Internet and became vulnerable to its influence. Because of the continual growth of the web, many businesses rely on digital marketing to increase their return on investment and popularity. The present study was conducted to explore individual's perceptions of digital marketing. This study investigates the differential impact of social media marketing on teenagers (age 13-20) and adults (age 30-55). Through a survey of 94 participants, we examine their exposure to various digital marketing techniques, their perceptions of advertising effectiveness, and their purchasing behaviors. The survey's conclusion revealed that teenagers, aged 13-20, were more vulnerable to the businesses' marketing techniques than the other experiment group, aged 30-55. The difference forms in the quality of activity they spend on the web and social media as it affected how the two groups perceived certain marketing techniques.

Introduction

With its official debut in 1997 through Bolt and Six Degrees, social media has taken a prominent part in millions of lives. ⁽¹⁷⁾ Labeled as a new area where users get to express their thoughts and interests, social media remains a popular platform among many users. Also called social network sites (SNS), there are many different types of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, where users are exposed to political, diverse, and trendy content. The start of social media is very different from what we use today; however, the concept and its mission are very similar. As time has evolved, today, there are over 5 billion users online recording a total screen time exceeding 12 billion hours daily. ⁽³⁾ Though many criticize its usage due to its highly addictive qualities, social media provides its users with a wide variety of entertainment and convenience, especially with how advanced the world is with media and technology.

In an era dominated by digital platforms, understanding how different age groups respond to social media marketing is crucial for effective communication and sales strategies. This study seeks to answer the question: Are adults (age 30-55) more influenced by targeted digital marketing tactics than teenagers (age 13-20)? The experiment hypothesizes that adults, despite potentially lower engagement with social media, may be more susceptible to tailored marketing messages due to factors such as established purchasing power and less experience with online advertising tactics.

Literature Review

Evolution of Digital and Social Media Marketing:

With the invention of the Web 1.0 platform, more people became active users of the Internet.⁽¹⁸⁾ Though the internet became a popular destination for many, data collection remained difficult due to limited customer data availability and inadequate tools.⁽¹⁹⁾ The emergence of more websites such as Yahoo (1994) and Google (1998) prompted a livelier media field but also indicated the strategy of optimizing their websites to pull in higher search engine rankings.⁽²⁵⁾ The invention of such websites initiated one of the first clickable banners and ads, which marked the beginning of the digital marketing age.

The fame of the internet was perpetuated as Web 2.0 generated and more users, including businesses, found the internet a comfortable habitat.⁽¹⁸⁾ Due to the domination of social media and the web, businesses started to utilize it for marketing techniques that attracted users and customers. The frequency of online shopping increased and foreshadowed digital marketing's wave of sensation. As the transactions done online required data collection, it became easier for companies to target audiences; but it also increased concerns about privacy, security, and internet usage.⁽¹⁹⁾

After the commencement of Facebook and the soaring attention it received in 2004, Facebook received several investments and ads within months. The founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, described Facebook ads as “a completely new way of advertising online.”⁽¹⁹⁾ He reclaimed the launch of social media marketing, “For the last hundred years media has been pushed out to people, but now marketers are going to be part of the conversation. And they're going to do this by using the social graph in the same way our users do” in 2006.⁽¹²⁾ The trend was expanded as more brands started to build their pages on Facebook and advertise their business. Aside from the B2C interactions on social media, the creation of other platforms like LinkedIn promoted B2B transactions to take place.⁽¹¹⁾ The ability to connect and collect information from their target audience was an appealing tool that many marketers admired.

Today, 60% of marketing professionals say that their customer data influences marketing decisions always or most of the time, and collecting performance metrics and consumer data was a game changer for many businesses at the time.⁽¹¹⁾ Professionals now say that social media is the top online activity in the US. 99% of marketers use Facebook to market and 97% use Twitter.⁽¹⁸⁾ Shown in the statistics, the development of social media also encouraged the development of digital marketing.

By using data analysis and collection, businesses raise their general familiarity with their target audience; then, they figure out the general trend of the public that would increase their return on investment (ROI). Using the amassed data, companies focus their marketing aptitude on showing their self-made brand image and performative assets of their company. They utilize social media to form videos or contents that may be pleasing to the customer; they also interact with customers and enhance their B2C content on social media. According to a Socialinsider study, Instagram reels have a two times higher average impression rate compared to other platforms— studies like these help the company figure out the tactics they need in their business.⁽²⁶⁾ They then analyze the results of their performance and review the general reaction of their marketing. By utilizing all the digital marketing tools introduced in the past along with the current trend in the marketing market using data enhances the revenue of their business and the overall achievements.

The Basic Structure of Digital Marketing

Cookies

Cookies exemplify the process where the information of the user is accessible when they enter a website.⁽²³⁾ After an individual's browsing data is collected from the server, the data is linked with a unique ID for the user and their computers. The servers can identify users' activity patterns and interests through the IDs and create an internet environment that is more suitable for the user, matching their preferences and activity, an activity also called "algorithm."

Regulations of Digital Marketing Data Collection

Although the cookie system may be beneficial and efficient to both businesses and consumers, concerns about internet security that rooted in cookies and the exposure of personal information caused the formation of international laws such as the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and state laws in California, California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA), that requires permission for the usage of certain cookies and remaining informative to users on how the cookies are affecting their internet experience. Due to the EU's new, broad policy in 2018 covering EU citizens around the world, businesses faced fines up to 10 million Euro or 2 percent of their annual global revenue per violation globally.⁽²¹⁾ Furthermore, Californians are eligible to sue businesses for issues that regard the invasion of personal boundaries of the users.⁽²⁾ The GDPR and CCPA increased consumer protection and the accountability of businesses.

The GDPR consists of an 88-page manual that elaborates on the intricate management of personal data that businesses may provide inconvenience for users. Though the extremely detailed criteria result in a different outcome for many businesses varying in size and system, GDPR keeps certain rules common and applicable. Expanded disclosure requires the users to be fully informed of the way their data is being collected and why the data is being collected. This process includes whom the data is shared with, along with how it is being used and protected. Regulations of the GDPR also include third-party companies to show compliance with GDPR if they were exposed to the data.⁽²¹⁾

It is also required for businesses and websites to grant their users more control; this allows the users more control over what is done with their data. Requests for copies and deletings of their data are always entitled rights of the users.⁽²¹⁾

How Regulation Changes Affected Companies

Because of regulations like the GDPR, companies have shown disparate responses to them. Apple, for instance, requires its employees to undergo privacy and security training once they access users' data.

Other bigger businesses like Meta, which includes Instagram and Facebook, and Amazon have faced larger consequences and penalties due to GDPR. According to the Enforcement Tracker, in September of 2022, Ireland's Data Protection Commission fined Meta Platforms Inc. approximately \$430 million and another in November 2022 of \$280 million. A report in November announced that about 533 million Facebook users' personal information got leaked.

The penalties also required the renovations of Meta's collection of users' data and their usage of it. The stricter regulations of the GDPR have made it more difficult for companies to ensure all the small, detailed laws that promote data safety. In total, by December of 2022, the GDPR had levied 1265 penalties leading to a total that exceeds \$2.5 billion.⁽²¹⁾

Digital Marketing Strategies

Regardless of the stringent regulations protecting consumer data, there still exist several digital marketing techniques in the marketing field.

Paid Ads

Paid search ads or PPCs are types of advertisements that appear near the top of the search result page when the customer looks up keywords. It contains headlines, descriptions, and a link to the website. PPC advertisements rely heavily on search engine optimization (SEO) to attract their target audiences, and drive a higher number of click-thru rates than regular advertisements without the SEO support.⁽¹⁾

Mobile Marketing:

Mobile marketing consists of marketing techniques such as text messages, phone calls, banner ads, etc. The increase in screen time usage also increased the effectiveness of mobile marketing, as it readily captured the attention of their customers on platforms they spend a major part of their time on. It was revealed to be an effective tool for local businesses as customers search for "business near me."

Retargeting:

Retargeting describes the marketing technique where businesses target past customers who have visited their website or business using cookies as they gather customers' information from their computers. Retargeting is a prominent driver for online eCommerce and SaaS businesses.

Video Marketing:

Video marketing utilizes advertising in the form of videos on platforms like YouTube to promote brands, businesses, or products. Electronic users usually spend over six hours on their electronic devices including watching videos.⁽¹³⁾As video consumption has increased, the preference for video marketing by businesses has also increased.

They are usually short impactful videos that include supplements like music, action, and visuals that appeal to the audience effectively. After its highest peak during the 1950s to the 1960s from the invention of the television and advance in video production, its spark eventually died down but gained its glory again after the emergence of social media apps like Vine, YouTube, Facebook, etc.⁽²²⁾ Its effectiveness in engaging the audiences, the evolution of social media, and the technological advancements shifted the popularity of video marketing again.

Social Media Marketing:



One of the biggest strategic marketing tools applied in businesses is social media. The main, common layouts seen through social media are videos, trends, and information that advertise the brand and company value, increase sales, and overall public interest. After the establishment of Facebook in 2004 and its appealing traits of connecting people through photos, videos, and captions, the rise in social networking services (SNS) took over the interest of customers and businesses. As of 2023, over five billion users are on social media.⁽³⁾

The main reasons why social media marketing (SMM) is highly effective and valuable is because of the connection, convenience, and customer data that social media provides for users and businesses.⁽¹⁰⁾ Many users rely on social media due to the efficiency and convenience the platform provides. For businesses, based on the cookies businesses collect from their user, they will find their target audience relying on traits like age, gender, and other demographics. Typical advertisement content for users 40 and above may be health care, home improvement, senior living, and travel.⁽¹⁶⁾ This makes approaching their target audience of businesses an easier process, which is why SMM remains as one of the most effective strategies in the market.

One of the most popular assets in digital marketing is shareable content. Sharable content describes the creation of attractive content that engages the audience with its quirks and sensible traits. The skill set includes viral marketing which requires the studying of the trends and popular aspects that align with the interests of the public. Tracking metrics, such as the number of views, saves, and shares present a good estimation of data that enhances the effectiveness of rendering shareable content. Details like popular influencers, challenges, and aesthetics that leave a deep impact in the audience's minds are all parts that marketing teams take into account when advocating virality.

Another strength of social media marketing is the earned media– it describes the exposure of the company in other ways that are not paid advertising.⁽¹⁰⁾ Reviews and comments can influence consumer choices and markets depending on the message delivered by them. According to a survey by Dimensional Research, 90% of respondents reported that positive online reviews influence their buying decisions, and adjacent results of 86% for the negative reviews.⁽⁸⁾

Digital Marketing Sales Funnel

Just like any other business field, to start a business, companies start with the foundation stage where they define their objectives and strategies. They need a clear definition of what their motives are and how they are promoting them. Businesses tend to research and organize to maximize their sales funnel. This stage includes customer investigation, competitor analysis, and setting market goals. This stage sets the rudimentary and firm base of the business.⁽⁵⁾

The next stage is fueling the funnel into the insights of more customers through digital marketing strategies such as search engines, paid ads, social media, etc. Through this stage, businesses usually derive general recognition and exposure from the public and become “known.” Search engine optimization is a long-term strategy that describes the instance where the business' website is ranked at the top of Google according to certain keywords.⁽²⁴⁾ This strategy galvanizes customers to rely on the business's website more than the others. Other strategies implemented

in this stage along with SEO can be the advertisement of the business through paid ads, social media marketing, or email marketing. To attract customers and increase the number of viewers of the website is the main motive in the introductory stage.⁽⁴⁾ Filling the funnel with relevant interest from the fitting target audience is important, and can be done by earning the interest of customers through the listed marketing strategies. Email marketing, for instance, can be a beneficial tool as it easily accesses the emails of the users whenever they sign up for an account or visit websites. Using this information they can build a larger, more accurate pool of audiences.

Once the brand gains familiarity and acknowledgment in the market, it begins to investigate the trends in the media that will expand their popularity rather than the recognition. They tend to shape the appearance and image that the business wants to pursue by the marketing techniques they use. They amass their key customers and form robust connections within the business field. To promote viralness and brand image, the type of influencers, promotions, and social media activities overtake the third stage of the sales funnel.

Figure 1: Representing the sales funnel.⁽²⁴⁾



Methods

Using the basic knowledge of the mechanism behind social media marketing and noticing how narrow the digital marketing sales funnel gets, it is evident that consumers with different age demographics receive different contents of advertisements from different businesses. However, though the types of ads are supposed to be personal to the consumers, it is highly possible that consumers aged 30-55 would show more vulnerability to digital marketing strategies that target them than teenagers. Teenagers are more exposed to social media and the digital marketing system. Adults (age 30-55) are hypothesized to be more vulnerable to targeted digital marketing strategies than teenagers (age 13-20) due to their less frequent exposure to social media and digital marketing, coupled with their established purchasing power.

To compare consumer purchasing behavior and the influence of social media marketing, an anonymous survey was conducted, comparing the purchasing behavior of two different demographics: teenagers (age 13-20) and adults (age 30-55). The questions asked about their daily use of social media, their general perception of it, and the customers' purchase decisions related to social media. A total of 93 respondents responded to the survey, 44 respondents being teenagers and 49 being adults.

The survey consisted of nine questions questioning the respondent's age and the social media app they used most often. Furthermore, there existed questions requiring the respondents to assess their activity intensity, perception of their vulnerability to trends and ads social media, and their purchase behavior on a scale of one to five.

The respondents were recruited locally– the gender of the majority were females. Over 80 percent of the teenage respondents were in the age range of 10-18 whereas the adults showed more age diversity in their respondents (59.2%= 50-60; 32.7%=40-50; 8.1%=30-40).

Results and Discussion

The survey revealed that both teenagers and adults were almost equally likely to notice ads on social media. This is supported by the question "On a scale of 1 to 5, how often do you notice ads and the content of it?" (question 2). Teenagers and adults endorsed similar scores on this question (Mean for teenagers = 3.41; Mean for adults = 3.39).

However, teenagers showed a higher likelihood of purchasing products directly through links and advertisements directed at them. This is supported by the question "Have you ever attended an event or bought a product because of an ad targeted at your demographic of social media?" (question 5) where 65.9% of teenagers responded with a yes, whereas only 40.8% of adults responded with a yes.

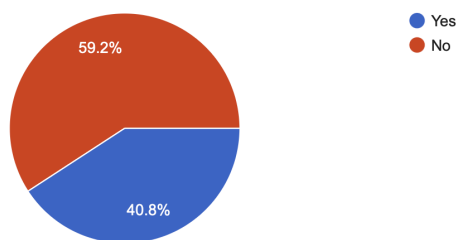


Figure 2: Response of adults.

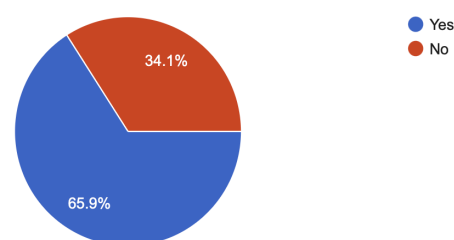


Figure 3: Response of teenagers.

Furthermore, when asked if they make online purchases directly through a link or an advertisement, an average weight response of 3.24 demonstrates that many teenagers were active participants in purchasing on social media platforms. In contrast, the adults showed a

weaker average weight of 2.89. This shows their weaker preferences in online shopping. These results contradict the hypothesis that the vulnerability of adults is greater than that of teenagers. When asked “Among these apps, which apps do you use regularly? (at least once a week)” the top answers among the teenage respondents were TikTok (34.1%) and Instagram(56.8%). For the adult respondents, the main social media platform used was YouTube (46.9%).

When asked to assess the pressure they receive to conform to trends they see in the media, teenagers responded with an average mean of 2.4, a number significantly higher than the average mean of 1.82 of the adults.

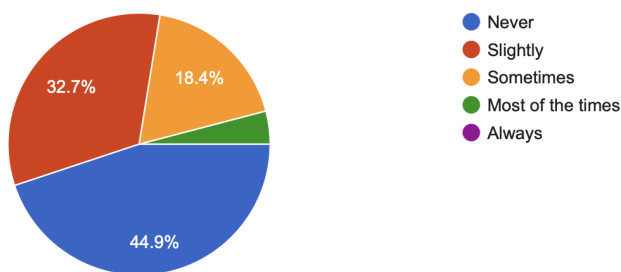


Figure 4: Response of adults.

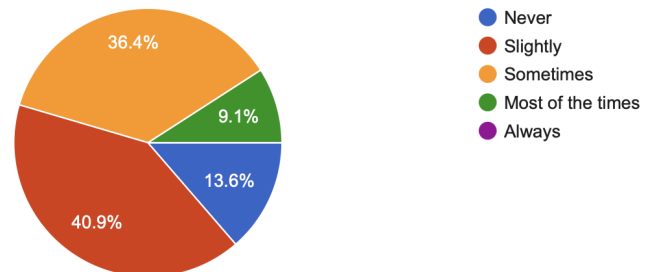


Figure 5: Response of teenagers.

When asked “On a scale of 1 to 5 how much do you think social media influences your perception of brands or products?” teenagers seemed to observe that they were easily influenced by the digital marketing strategy compared to adults.

What leads to this vulnerability of social media? If both experiment groups notice ads equally on social media, what is the ultimate causation of the difference? Though both groups may be experiencing equal exposure to ads, the types of ads that they view are different because of the social media platform they are active on. Social media that teenagers were most active on was Instagram and Tiktok while the adults were most attentive on YouTube. Though these apps all show some sort of ads that are meant to stimulate consumption, the types of ads differ. On TikTok and Instagram, shorter videos and posts that last about 20-60 seconds are the main contents preferred by their audiences. It takes less effort for the creators to publish posts whereas on YouTube, it requires more time to publish a video on top of the idea that many audiences, especially in the modern world, may find the longer YouTube videos (averaging about 5-10 minutes). However, the platform YouTube utilizes the tool algorithm very skillfully and matches the videos to the correct, interested audience. Furthermore, amongst the social media apps, YouTube showed the highest ROI of \$6.5 per dollar spent compared to Instagram and TikTok \$5-6 and \$5.2 respectively.⁽¹⁴⁾ Additionally, the contents of the ads the adults confront are topics (insurance, health products, travel, etc.) that require more research than just an ad.⁽¹⁵⁾ Given the findings, marketers targeting teenagers should focus on creating engaging, short-form video contents on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, while those targeting adults might find success with longer, informative videos and targeted ads on platforms like YouTube.

Moreover, teenagers showed stronger propensity to conform to trends due to the pressure they feel to do so. This explains the higher rates of vulnerabilities reported from the teenagers compared to the adult age group.

The findings of this study have significant implications for marketers seeking to optimize their social media campaigns for different demographics. While teenagers exhibit higher engagement with social media, adults demonstrate greater susceptibility to targeted advertising. This suggests that marketers targeting adults should focus on personalization and relevance, while those targeting teenagers might prioritize interactive and trend-driven content.

Limitations of the Survey

Though the survey presented a result that contrasted the initial hypothesis, there were some limitations to the experiment. The demographic of the survey was biased in the sense that there existed gender domination. The percentage of males in the teenager experiment group was approximately 6% of the whole population, an extreme minority. Gender differences could be a factor in making the differences that occur in social media usage: the intention and interest of social media differ for the two genders.

Overall, female users show a higher attendance rate on social media than male users. In 2021, 44% of the female population in the U.S. reported using Instagram, whereas the male population reported 36%.⁽⁶⁾ The statistic is an indicator that the female population is more active users of social media than the male population, so their perception of social media differs. Women tend to take emotions into account on social media whereas for men, “business-related issues” are their priorities.⁽⁷⁾ This causes companies to target their two audiences with disparate strategies.

Furthermore, a study by Affilinet reports “that 84.3% of men buy online, compared to 77% of women.”⁽⁷⁾ In spite of this, according to the 2012 study done by the digital marketing agency iProspect reveals that there has been an increasing growth in men’s online shopping preference. Reasons such as lack of pressure, access, details, and convenience prodded the preference for online shopping.⁽²⁰⁾ Psychological elements such as the stronger emotional tendency of a woman suggest that women buy 75% faster than men when facing images (real-life confrontation) rather than descriptions on the internet.⁽⁷⁾ This conclusion may generate stronger mean values inducing stronger online purchasing behaviors in both age groups.

The survey's predominantly female sample may limit the generalizability of findings, as research suggests gender differences in online shopping behavior and social media use. Future research should aim for a more balanced sample to explore these nuances further.

This study is limited by its reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias. Additionally, the sample size, while sufficient for statistical analysis, may not be fully representative of the broader population. Future research with larger, more diverse samples could strengthen the generalizability of these findings.



Conclusion

The difference in the vulnerability of two different age groups is apparent as the experiment has revealed— though both experiment groups experience similar exposure to the media and digital marketing, teenagers showed the tendency to be more affected by it. The explanation for the main reasoning behind the response of the respondents may be the distinct content of ads and platforms, the engagement level of social media of the two age groups, and their sensitivity to conforming to social media trends. Using these findings, targeting teenagers through contents that are short-videos enhancing engagement on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram will be a stronger strategy for marketers, whereas longer, information-packed videos are more suitable for adults. This study underscores the importance of tailoring digital marketing strategies to specific age groups. The contrasting responses of teenagers and adults to social media marketing highlight the need for nuanced approaches that consider the unique characteristics and online behaviors of each demographic. By understanding these differences, marketers can create more effective campaigns that resonate with their target audiences.

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