

MARKETING TRENDS: USING MEMES TO TARGET GENERATION Z

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RESUMO

Embora a Geração Z se manifeste há muito pouco tempo quando comparada com as predecessoras, tem-se revelado, contudo, a geração mais influente e disruptiva no que respeita às formas de comunicação e à evolução do próprio marketing. Os jovens da Geração Z são nativos digitais e estão online todo o tempo, pelo que os media sociais se configuram como a melhor via para atingir e comunicar com essa audiência, tão exigente e influenciadora. Neste contexto, as marcas procuram novas formas de cativar e interagir mais naturalmente com a Geração Z, tendo a utilização de *memes* pelo marketing provado ser uma estratégia eficaz e bem-sucedida.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Geração Z, *Memes*, Media sociais

ABSTRACT

Although Generation Z has been around for a short period comparing to previous generations, it has been one of the most influential and world-changing so far, shaping the way communication is made and how marketing itself is portrayed. This highly digital generation is online almost all the time, and social media is the new way of embracing and reaching this demanding and influential audience. Brands search for new ways to captivate these consumers and interact more naturally. The use of memes in marketing strategies has proven to be effective and surprisingly successful when it comes to winning over this selective generation.

KEYWORDS

Generation Z, *Memes*, Social media

INTRODUCTION

The world is a fast-paced environment, constantly mutable and oddly adaptable, which are only a few traits that can be related to the globalized era of quick information and an unstoppable generation. The fragmented perception of information itself has changed with the rise of the internet, the World Wide Web's, whose name is self-explanatory: it suggests just how much one small content can affect and interfere with people all over the place.

However, globalization also brings a robust virtual influence, since borders are no longer a way of limiting people's interactions. The digital world is a way to connect and share, which is the explicit demonstration of the adaptiveness characteristic of the most recent and intriguing generation: Generation Z.

Completely adapted to the virtual scenario, they have their way of sharing information and communicating, especially since it is a highly digital generation. New ways of expressing their thoughts and opinions develop as the power of social media platforms increase, and that can easily be seen in the growth of creation and sharing of *memes*, which have become an exceedingly popular form of communication (Rocha, 2017).

Generation Z thinks fast, and the way it shares its thoughts and opinions differ from other generations, mostly by using social media to connect with their friends. It indirectly makes brands seek new ways of captivating and engaging this promising generation. Brands need to understand how to appeal to the Generation Z customer, to successfully capture this customer base, which implies taking popular culture into account (Brill, 2019), memes being an expression of such culture.

Such trends are the drivers for this article, trying to understand the essential characteristics of Generation Z and its behavior regarding memes as an increasingly important vehicle to convey brand communication.

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I. LITERATURE REVIEW

Generation Z was born connected and had more options than the previous ones in terms of how and where to spend money. Therefore, marketing to their members is challenging and requires much effort from companies seeking to get their attention. Understanding this tricky and powerful generation can be the key to a successful marketing strategy. That is especially true when one learns how to 'speak its language' and interact to make it easier to establish a connection by taking advantage of memes and social media to influence consumer behavior.

1. GENERATION Z

The Millennials have been the focus of marketing and sales strategies in recent years, setting a personalized pace molded to their attributes and preferences. That specific detail is why many companies and firms are having a difficult time adapting to the upcoming Generation Z, given its many different characteristics compared to all previous generations.

Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2019) decided to use 1996 as the last birth year for Millennials. According to it, anyone born between 1981 and 1996 is considered a Millennial, and anyone born from 1997 onward is considered to be part of this refreshing and highly influential group, Generation Z, or Gen Z for short.

The year 1996 is believed to be a meaningful cutoff between Millennials and Gen Z for different reasons, including political, economic, and social factors that define the Millennial generation's formative years (Dimock, 2019).

Also known as digital natives, Gen Zers focus on reality, and the incessant need to communicate and share what they think, feel, and expect.

Generations are a reflection of the context in which they emerged – in this case, one where the virtual and digital gradually subdue most traditional forms of media. A research conducted by The McKinsey & Company team shows that this generation feels comfortable in having more than one way of expressing itself. The search for authenticity creates greater freedom of expression and a more significant

desire to stay connected. Heightened perception and short attention span also characterized Gen Zers.

Another essential trait of this unique generation is its mentality, which plays a critical role in building brand personality and working on new marketing strategies, taking into consideration diversity, social responsibility, and open-mindedness, which are amongst Gen Z's values.

As they enter the global marketplace and determine new ways of sharing content and preferences, Gen Z is here to stay, effectively shaping new media outlets and changing the way marketing and communication itself is made.

Social media are replacing newspapers, magazines, and even television. Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and TikTok are only a few media used by Generation Z.

Gen Zs spend a considerable amount of time online, usually more than five hours on their mobile phones every day (Cheung, 2017). Short videos and images are the preferred form of communication over articles and usual propaganda, which is the ideal way to capture those new consumers' attention and readjust the information to reach and influence their preferences and get more acquainted with their tastes.

Generation Z is an expert at shaping the future, unlike any generation has before, caring about social and environmental issues, and having a unique way of dealing with tragic and harsh realities.

This generation was born amid economic crises and wars. As such, this generation has values such as flexible stability, and it is known for seeking out to humor as a way to balance the more pressing concerns they have in life (Seemiller & Grace, 2018). They favor humor in videos and images, mainly conveyed through the tool that motivated this article: memes.

2. MEMES

Information that travels within social media platforms has new content every day, quickly spreading and becoming popular at a very high pace. Most of these contents are made up of images, videos, and GIFs to create humor in its presentation, and suddenly become viral. This type of content is known as *memes*, a term created by Richard

Dawkins (1976). The word comes from the Greek “mimeme”, which means imitation in a free translation, compressing into two syllables so that the pronunciation looks like “gene”. It is also a form of cultural transmission, and the speed or rate at which it is shared can influence the extent to how viral it becomes.

Gelb (1997) refers to memes as “self-replicating ideas that move through time and space without further effort from the source”. Accordingly, any communication that generates its repetition, even under new forms, is a “meme” by definition. Brands, images, and expressions can be seen or heard, again and again, without additional effort by an advertiser.

Clay Shirky, the author of “Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age”, describes a very usual scenario to be found in cyberculture in his works, which is opportune for the dissemination of memes: the creation of content by the hands of amateur individuals (McKinsey, 2011). The internet has become an environment of active participation. The user can absorb the information that is made available through the media and contribute to the content itself. Thus, it is usual to notice a progressive performance of the amateur culture on the internet, expressed more than ever in the universe of memes.

Memes have become an omnipresent tool on the internet (Beskow et al., 2020), combining cultural relevance with humor. A survey conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom in May 2019 (Intelligence, 2019) shows that Generation Z is hyperconnected and highly opinionated. According to the study, “natives are evolving towards creative expression, thanks to digital intuition and unlimited inspiration on the internet”. Generation Z is considered to be the most creative one so far, and it reflects on the way feelings and information are shared.

The creation of memes and the way and speed at which they are easily shared online reflects how quickly Gen Z can produce them. Although not explored in this text, certain constraints should be considered in this regard, namely copyright issues: many memes use copyrighted images (Scialabba, 2020). That could be seen as an infringement actionable by copyright owners.

To keep up with this constant creation process, brands have to place themselves in a strategic position to reach Gen Zers and manage to interact with them effectively.

3. MEMES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The participatory culture of memes contrasts with older perceptions about the passivity of media viewers. Instead of talking about media producers and consumers as separate roles, one can now consider them as interactive participants (Jenkins et al.).

The characteristics emerging from this brand-new context being experienced by the advertising area are establishing and reorienting the advertising system. With the emergence of recent technologies and new patterns of public behavior, a growing need to create clear messages among a whirlwind of advertising voices has become a significant challenge to marketing agencies and brands.

Although many people do not like to admit it, memes have become content that generates excellent results in most cases, and prove their effectiveness when it comes to marketing strategies, especially those aimed at Generation Z. In addition to winning people over with humor, memes can convert views into followers for companies on social media platforms. They use that to form a link with digital consumers, making the brands themselves more human and social, able to relate more easily to the public.

The whole point of memes is to share. Once they are relatable and funny, their propagation will likely be much faster and successful. If a friend shares a meme with another friend, the cycle starts, and the process of becoming viral is a possibility, which is an ideal setting for a well-thought meme marketing strategy. Social networks have become very important where brands seek to explore available resources and tools to create exposure, that is, getting closer to their audience. Memes can be used in digital marketing strategies, as they are a part of the conversations that audiences are having in the virtual space.

To keep up with the “meme movement” and the ever-changing digital scenario, promotion professionals, should pay attention to the upcoming Generation Z, taking into consideration its massive influence on digital content and online participation. As companies get more comfortable and learn more about this new era, it is noticeable that memes’ use to promote specific products or services is becoming more and more recurrent. To reach young people online, many brands have turned to Instagram’s influenc-

ers, but these are seen more and more as inauthentic (Roache, 2019), as they are inserting too many sponsored ads. Memes offer an alternative, more authentic and engaging, and have higher chances of becoming viral and spreading outside an Instagram account.

To be able to explore memes authentically is a powerful tool to show Generation Z what a brand stands for and demonstrate how the company itself can understand this generation and its lifestyle, which only creates a more potent engagement force between them and the brand.

4. SOCIAL MEDIA AND GENERATION Z

Understanding consumer behavior is a complex task, especially when it comes to a young and demanding audience such as Generation Z. In this sense, marketing strategies play a fundamental role in influencing and reaching these new customers. Companies are slowly learning the best ways to make their products known, and social media platforms are currently space where more can be learned about these highly digital Gen Zers (Igielnik, 2020).

As a generation connected to trends and everything new and technologically attractive, social media is the perfect instrument to engage and communicate, as well as focus on brand awareness and seek a deeper connection with Generation Z.

The constant inflow of small bits of information from Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube, with its few second patterns of imaging, is rewiring the brain to expect information to be delivered in short, rapid bursts (Rothman, 2016). That is why social media has become one of the most effective ways to communicate and advertise among this generation. However, the process of adaptation can be quite a challenge if the brand does not attempt to keep up with the fast-paced velocity in which information and ads are delivered every day.

One of the most widely spread social media today that many brands are using is Instagram. It first emerged as social media for sharing photos, but now Instagram offers a tool to visualize advertisements and market products more efficiently. Instagram's business profile contains promotional ads' buttons and analytics features that can be

processed by online stores to market their products to potential customers (Handayani et al., 2018). A link is created between the sale of a physical product or service with publications that one already made available on Instagram.

5. EXAMPLES OF MEMES IN SOCIAL MEDIA ADVERTISING

It is becoming more frequent for consumers to skip ads as much as they can. Therefore, the use of marketing with humor and familiar forms of media can be the key to engage and reach the perfect audience.

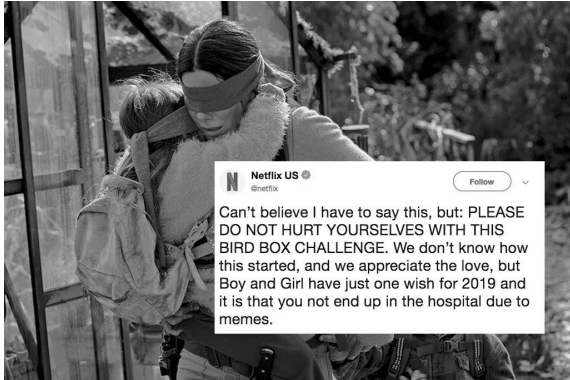
Meme marketing can be a very cheap and effective way to interact and bring more visibility to a brand, once done correctly, and after a thorough study of the target audience (Enthoven, 2019).

As reported by Roache (2019), companies are laughing at themselves in sponsored memes, as a strategy to win over Generation Z. In figures 1 to 4, some examples of how brands worked along with memes are presented, showing the way they seized the opportunity to be authentic and set a unique voice to make the brand stand out amongst competitors.

The key is to maintain brand consistency and appeal to the consumers at the same time. To do that, companies must find a way to fit brand voice to this new strategy, subsequently expanding its reach significantly – especially if the brand's target audience is Generation Z.

The best example can be seen on Netflix's social media accounts since the company takes interaction with its audience very seriously, especially since most of them are part of Generation Z. Netflix creates its memes and shares content created by the users, which ends up being outstanding marketing and brand positioning. The company's Twitter account, for example, is also mainly focused on interacting with the audience, which brings the brand closer to the public and strengthens their bond in a fun and creative way.

FIGURE 1
NETFLIX MEME



Source: <https://junkee.com/netflix-bird-box-challenge/188356>

FIGURE 2
RUFFLES MEME



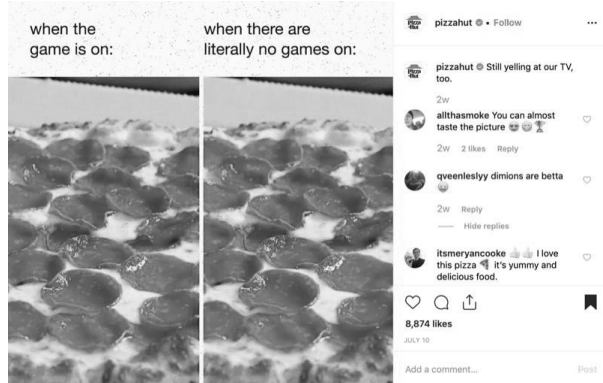
Source: <https://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/how-to-use-memes-guide-for-marketers>

FIGURE 3
JIMMY JOHNS MEME



Source: <https://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/how-to-use-memes-guide-for-marketers/>

FIGURE 4
PIZZA HUT



Source: <https://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/how-to-use-memes-guide-for-marketers/>

Memes can be used as a useful tool for marketing strategy. Companies have found more accessible ways to connect and interact with their audiences, using the enormous range of possibilities social media offers today. In particular, the focus is more and more on Generation Z, which is highly connected to all means of social media and technology. These new consumers are setting a new pace in the world; therefore, in the marketing environment, forcing innovation in the way advertising is done.

The use of memes in marketing itself, and the extent to which it can successfully strengthen the bonds with the brand's audience are only proof of how influential these consumers can be, inspiring companies to have more creativity and personality. Memes are no longer just a way of entertainment, but a great option to increase marketing reach and create brand awareness.

Generation Z brought along a new opportunity to expand marketing's horizons, and it is inducing innovation in the way brands convey their messages. Memes are just one of the ways their influence can be acknowledged, making it easier to generate leads and sales if explored correctly.

Turning viral and increasing brand exposure are just some of the reasons why memes are now being used as an essential tool of social media strategies. The key is to study the target audience and current trends, keeping an open mind about the future, and expecting the unexpected.

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