GENERATION Z'S HIDDEN SOCIAL MEDIA RULE BOOK

by

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This study explores how Generation Z's behavioral expectations for each other on social media impact their relationships, health, and overall well-being. According to a 2016 study published in the *Journal of Adolescence*, about half of the time that teens spend on the internet is dedicated to social media. Adolescents experience heightened pressure to be active on social media out of fear of becoming "irrelevant" or fading into the background of their friends' social circles. In addition, previous studies have shown that young people are experiencing heightened levels of depression, lack of sleep, problematic social media usage, and social media addiction. Unlike any previous research, this study looks at the intersection of social media usage with inter/intrapersonal relationships and wellness. Generation Zers who consistently use social media think about how their online activity could be perceived by their friends. Due to social media's transparency in revealing real-time activity, the digital landscape has created an authentic level of complexity to relationships and a coinciding unspoken set of social standards to abide by online.

I predict that these hidden norms are pervasive and relevant in the minds of Generation Z, that Gen Zers individually hold themselves to lower social media

standards than their peers, and that social media expectations negatively impact their real-life friendships. Eighty-four participants completed a scenario-based survey that gauged how they would feel or react in a situation on a given social media platform. The results show that social media is no longer an outside element from interpersonal communication; it is an entangled third entity that can genuinely alter a friendship. The participants' responses reveal that social media standards vary for each individual and also on each social media platform. Gen Z is the first generation to grow up with social media as a vital part of their social landscape. Consequently, because no one has navigated behavioral standards before them, the Generation Z social media rule book is messy and disjointed. Young people are not on the same wavelength about what is and is not acceptable behavior on social media.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Sheehan and Professor Matthews for helping me to fully examine Generation Z's social media expectations and consider the various perspectives and contexts related to this subject matter. I am incredibly grateful to have extremely encouraging and passionate experts willing to guide me through this valuable process. I would also like to thank my SOJC Honors Cohort for inspiring me to produce the highest quality research and our director, Nicole Dahmen, for giving me the tools to succeed in writing this thesis. To my family and loved ones, particularly Carmina Kissinger and Kyle Stipe, your reassuring words and unending support fueled me to complete this daunting task. Thank you for being my number one fans.

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Thesis Introduction

When I studied abroad on Semester at Sea in the fall of 2017, I had limited, slow access to the internet. My only connection to the digital world was through a set number of news sites and my email account, jokingly referred to as "Seamail," on our ship. Consequently, I was only able to log onto Instagram six times over a span of 100 days. These rare moments of social media access happened at internet cafes when we were docked in various countries. I lost touch with a lot of my friends from back home, but I was able to delve deeper into my friendships with other people on the program. All of us college students had to relearn how to socialize without the comforting presence of our phones at our sides. Without access to the endless stream of content on social media, we had to come up with creative ways to entertain ourselves. We would run around the ship playing hide-and-seek. Some of us would start up musical jam sessions in the stairwells, but my favorite moments were the long, meaningful late-night conversations. It was refreshing that none of us were distracted by Instagram or Twitter notifications. The absence of social media forced us to connect with each other on a deeper, personal level.

I grew so accustomed to authentically enjoying other's company sans technology, that I struggled to reconnect with people my age upon my return to the United States. My friends would get annoyed with me for not opening their Snapchats in a timely manner or for not replying to a meme that they tagged me in on Facebook. College dinner conversations were about the latest viral video, but I was out of the loop since I was still unaccustomed to checking social media regularly. I had to relearn how to navigate these unspoken expectations that young people have for each other on social

media. And in doing so, it made me think critically about the reasons why and methods by which Generation Z (people born between 1997-2012) holds each other to these standards for digital interaction and consumption.

American youth are constantly on their phones. Technology reigns supreme for Generation Z, the first generation to grow up with smartphones fully integrated into their childhood. According to a 2016 study published in the *Journal of Adolescence*, about half of the time that teens spend on the internet is dedicated to social media (Scott, 2016). Young people use social media for multiple reasons and at various levels of regularity, but the commonality behind their usage is that they primarily want to stay in touch with their friends (Quinn, 2016). Their real-life social network and support group is literally at their fingertips. In this fast-paced digital world, it has become increasingly easy for teenagers to keep tabs on each other, but consequently, it is just as simple to fall out of the loop if they fail to keep up with their friends' social media activity. The more someone posts, the more they are on the forefront of their friends' minds. Therefore, adolescents experience heightened pressure to be active on social media out of fear of becoming "irrelevant" or fading into the background of their friends' social circles (Leung, 2013). Young people feel a need to be on social media because of the integral role it plays in nurturing and maintaining in-person friendships (Kircaburun, 2018).

And now, social media's function has extended beyond sharing the highlights or best bits of one's life. Different facets of social media trickle into reality. Instagram direct messages reveal how long ago a person was active on the site. Snapchat informs friends of your exact location, unless you have opted out and chosen to be on "ghost"

mode. These social media features map out a picture of your real-time activity, and the young, social media savvy individual can read into and interpret what this means. For example, if a friend sent a text to you an hour ago, but they see that you were active on Instagram only 15 minutes ago, they may wonder why you are ignoring their text. Even if you simply have not seen their message yet, your friend might think that you are upset with them for some reason. Or if you are sitting at home by yourself on a Saturday night, and you go on Snapchat and see that a group of your friends are hanging out together because they have posted videos on their stories, you might wonder why they did not invite you. In certain situations, Generation Z's innocent use of social media creates worry and anxiety for each other, which could then snowball and bubble over into their friendships in real life. Based on my own experience and after talking to many of my peers about their interactions on social media, I have concluded that Generation Zers who consistently use social media have to think about how their online activity could be perceived by their friends. Therefore, due to social media's transparency in revealing real time activity, the digital landscape has created an authentic level of complexity to relationships and a coinciding unspoken set of social standards to abide by online.

Objective of Research

In this thesis, I will explore Generation Z's unspoken expectations for interacting with their friends on social media. I collected data on this topic through a robust survey administered to members of Generation Z. The questions explored how participants would feel or react in specific social media scenarios to gauge their expectations of their friends as well as the online social standards that they hold

themselves too. The survey also included questions that assessed if respondents' social media usage is consistent with uses and gratifications explored in previous studies (staying in the loop, social media addiction, sleep loss, stress, etc.) This research is important because social media has drastically altered the way young people interact with each other in real life. In the same way that we have social standards for how to behave in public, there is now an uncharted etiquette that Generation Zers abide by when interacting online. Making a social media faux-paux can have an immediate, real time effect on a friendship. It is imperative to study how specific online interactions can positively or negatively alter a real-life relationship. These hidden norms are so pervasive and relevant in the minds of Generation Z, that it has created a cultural shift in behavior. Social media is no longer an outside, distant element from interpersonal communication; it is now an entangled third entity that can drastically and irreversibly change a friendship.

Literature Review

Uses and Gratifications Theory in Social Media

Uses and gratifications is a media theory that states people strategically and actively use specific media to fulfill certain goals (Ward, 2016). These user motivations can be intentional or unintentional, but often stem from ritualized media use. In the United States, social media is one of the most habitual forms of media consumption. People who are active on social media have various reasons for usage, but the underlying commonality is a desire for socialization (Quan-Haase et al., 2010). According to Statista, a media data firm, there are 208.91 million unique social media users in the United States. Facebook is resoundingly the most popular social media app with 168.76 million monthly users. However, the social media site is mainly popular among older generations (Statista, 2018). Previous studies have shown that teens spend a significant amount of time on the internet, and about half of that time is spent on social media (Scott et al., 2016). As of Spring 2018, the most popular social media platform for teens was Snapchat, followed by Instagram and then Twitter (Statista, 2018). Younger people are shifting away from Facebook and are instead embracing different platforms (Statista, 2018). This shows that generations interact with social media in different ways and for various purposes. Therefore, each generation has unique preferences for communicating amongst each other. Researchers must track and analyze these differences to see how and why the American social media landscape changes over time. Researchers have found that social media is primarily used as a relaxing pastime

activity, a way to present oneself in a popular light, and a gratification for sociability (Quan-Haase et al., 2010; Kircaburun et al., 2018). Young people like to find out about activities that are happening in their community and stay knowledgeable about what is happening in their friends' lives. They feel a need to have multiple social media platforms to fulfill specific communication and information needs (Quan-Haase et al., 2010). Certain personality traits impact social media gratifications as well. For example, people who are more narcissistic find more pleasure in using social media (Leung, 2013). Social media is the ideal platform for narcissistic individuals to have full control over self-presentation and to illicit the attention that they desire from other people. The more gratification someone finds from creating content for social media, the more likely they are to use social media and post more often (Leung, 2013). Interestingly enough, researchers found that even though people under 18 are the most internet savvy, narcissism is tied the least to their use of social media compared to other age groups (Leung, 2013). However, it still fulfilled their need for companionship and sharing affection.

Generation Z

Generation Z (born 1997-2012) is the first generation to have grown up with smartphones. As of 2018, the oldest Gen Zers are seniors in college, so this generation comprises students in all levels of education. However, mostly middle school, high school, and college students are active on social media due to parental privacy concerns and age restrictions for elementary school children (Statista). Generation Zers are the most social media savvy generation. They are often able to multitask on various platforms and mediums (Williams, 2015). In general, it is often assumed that Gen Zers

have similar values as Generation Y, the first generation born after technologies became commonplace, more commonly referred to as millennials. However, there are distinct differences between the two generations' treatment of social media. Millennials have a variety of opinions on social media usage in the professional and personal sphere. Overall, they view social media as a positive tool that enhances knowledge, particularly in academia (Verčič et al., 2013). On the other hand, Gen Zers rapidly engage with media content (Williams, 2015). They also interact with each other on social media platforms in the same prompt, quick manner. They value innovative formats, interactive messaging, attention to aesthetic, and the use of humor on social media platforms (Southgate, 2017). Media producers have to change their digital marketing and advertising to hold Generation Z's short attention span. Many of these young social media professionals are millennials, and it is incredibly important for them to understand and cater to Generation Z's unique social media gratifications because they are the new target audience.

Online Friendship

Generational differences aside, the American public is divided on whether social media helps or hinders friendships. Some believe that social media negatively impacts relationships because screen time detracts from authentic, in-person interactions (Dolcetta, 2017). In addition, social media is a façade of someone's life, the best bits curated and posted for other's judgment. Therefore, it creates a layer of inauthenticity that trickles offline into in-person relationships. Another argument against social media as a socialization tool is that the majority of one's Facebook friends and Instagram followers are not people who they would call friends in real life (Dolcetta, 2017). On

the other hand, many think that social media can strengthen friendships when used to supplement instead of replace real-life interaction. Traits of a healthy friendship are empathy, reciprocity, self-knowledge, and shared life, all of which can be enacted and carried out online (Vallor, 2011). Unfortunately, society does not promote these healthy friendship habits on social media. Instead of seeking genuine, joyful ways to support each other on social media, a lot of people are only fixated on the number of likes that they receive on a post (Vallor, 2011). It is tricky and complex for Generation Z to figure out how to beneficially engage with one another online because everyone has their own gratifications for social media use. The majority of these motivations (outlined in the following section) are self-centered and self-seeking, making it challenging to enact supportive friendships online.

Social Media's Impact on Health

Adolescents' self-esteem and mental health is significantly tied to the amount of sleep that they get. Social media notifications and the temptation to be on the phone late at night can interrupt young people's sleep (Scott et al., 2016). Overall social media use, nighttime specific usage, and emotional investment in social media are all linked to poorer sleep quality, lower self-esteem, and higher levels of depression and anxiety in adolescents regardless of gender (Scott et al., 2016). It is likely that young people have a hard time relaxing at bed time because they are anxious about missing out on social media or not seeing a message from a friend. There is a strong, cyclical connection between sleep quality, social media usage, emotional investment in social media, and mental health status. People place demands upon themselves to be available on their phones at all times (Thomée et al., 2010). This pressure comes from work/school, an

individual's social circle and that person's own desires. Consequently, people sometimes stay on edge when they should be resting. They feel as though they cannot escape their busy schedule, and they have difficulty separating work from private life (Thomée et al., 2010). Young people feel guilty when they do not reply on time to calls and messages. Constant phone notifications create significant pressure for Gen Zers to be on the phone and available to respond at all times. It also contributes to the fear of missing out (FoMO) at events and gatherings.

FoMO and Social Media Addiction

Fear of Missing Out, or FoMO, is the desire to stay in-the-know about what others are doing driven by the fear of not attending a rewarding outing or experience. Social media both feeds and abates FoMO because it makes the user aware about a multitude of activities, so many that it would be physically impossible for a person to attend all of them. Young people, particularly males, report higher instances of FoMO (Przybylski, 2013). Individuals who are less in tune with their psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and desire for companionship also have higher levels of FoMO. Overall, FoMO negatively impacts mood, life satisfaction, and social media usage (Przybylski, 2013). People who experience this phenomenon are more likely to check social media at inappropriate times, such as when operating a motor vehicle or during a school lecture. These are examples of problematic social media usage, or PSMU (Kircaburun et al., 2018).

PSMU is often tied to social media addiction. Over 210 million people worldwide suffer from social media addiction and technology dependence; that is approximately 6% of the population (Longstreet et al., 2017). FoMO was the leading

and strongest indicator of social media addiction. It is probable that many of those who suffer from social media addiction are Gen Zers because they are the ones who have been completely immersed in the digital landscape. Studies have found that personal qualities such as neuroticism, attachment style, extraversion, and FoMO could lead to social media addiction (Blackwell, 2017). Other studies have revealed that in terms of demographics, being a woman, introverted, amicable, thorough, and neurotic were traits that linked to high scores of PSMU (Kircaburun et al., 2018). Students who preferred Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat had higher indications of PSMU. Furthermore, when life satisfaction decreases, social media addiction will increase (Longstreet et al., 2017). Conversely, when life satisfaction increases due to happiness, then levels of addiction will decrease. This suggests that there are ways to mitigate social media addiction through seeking out moments of joy by oneself or with others without media involvement. If Gen Zers seek the gratification of happiness and socialization from social media, they must also keep in mind that they can find these things outside of the virtual space.

The Privacy Paradox

For some young people, the social interaction and online camaraderie outweigh the risk of publicizing personal information. The privacy paradox is the discrepancy between someone's stated privacy preferences and their actual privacy behaviors, such as how social media users are sometimes willing to sacrifice their confidentiality to attain their media goals (Quinn, 2016). According to previous studies, the strongest reasons for sacrificing privacy are identity loss, future life of information, wanting to find out about others, and habit (Quinn, 2016). Generation Z's willingness to give up

their privacy in exchange for getting likes or receiving other forms of online attention from their peers puts them at real risk. This indicates that the privacy paradox will continue to be an evolving issue as new social media features and platforms emerge.

Parents have always been concerned about protecting their children from cyber-bullying or online predators (Quinn, 2016). However, this has become increasingly difficult with the emergence of new location tracking features on popular social media apps. For example, Snapchat released the "Snap Map" last year. This feature allows Snapchat users to pinpoint your exact location from anywhere in the world at any given time, unless a user manually opts out by enacting "ghost mode." Many government agencies were disturbed by how invasive the Snap Map could be. The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority in India even issued an official warning to citizens to turn their Snapchats onto ghost mode to protect their privacy (UAE Government News, 2017). However, Gen Zers like to be able to see where their friends are because they can meet up with each other whenever they wish. The wording behind the opt out feature, "ghost mode," even implies a separation from one's friends. Therefore, many Gen Zers are willing to overlook this invasion of their privacy for the social outcomes that they wish to obtain from Snapchat (Quinn, 2016).

The Present Study

Social media makes it incredibly easy for people to stay in touch with each other. However, because Gen Zers grew up in the era of the smartphone, they hold each other to different social and behavioral standards online (Williams, 2015). For example, when someone posts a picture on Instagram, they often expect their friends to like and comment on their post (Quan-Haase et al., 2010). If these intended outcomes are not

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met, Gen Zers may experience feelings of inadequacy or distress (Scott et al., 2016).

Personality traits such as neuroticism, narcissism and FoMO can be reasons behind why

these hidden norms are in place (Przybylski, 2013). Mental health disorders like anxiety

and depression can fuel problematic social media usage and social media addiction

(Scott et al., 2016). Gen Zers have created a high-pressure online culture that can

negatively affect not only their own health, but also their friendships with others

(Thomée et al., 2010). This study seeks to explicitly outline the intricacies and

motivations behind Generation Z's social media standards.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study will delve into specific expectations that Generation Zers hold each other to on various social media platforms, but first I must establish a baseline understanding of what these standards are. Previous studies have shown that Gen Z's primary gratifications for social media are socialization, social appearance, entertainment, and relaxation. However, the social standards that they hold each other to could potentially add worry and anxiety to a pastime that is meant to be enjoyable. If Gen Z's unspoken social media etiquette disrupts their current uses and gratifications for the media, then why do they continue to use it? These research questions aim to uncover what Generation Z's social media expectations really are and how they impact their current uses and gratifications for social media. The first research question aims to uncover to what extent Generation Zers care about each other's behavior on social media. "High" behavioral expectations are characterized by Gen Zers emotional investment in a social media scenario other than "neutral" or "unbothered." If these social standards elicit either a positive or negative response in Gen Zers, then this hypothesis will be proven true. If Gen Zers have more neutral/unbothered answers, then this hypothesis will be proven false.

RQ1: Do Generation Zers have high behavioral expectations for each other on social media?

H1: Yes, Gen Zers have high behavioral expectations for each other on social media.

Gen Zers might hold their peers to different social media standards than what they expect of themselves. As noted in previous studies, narcissism plays a role in some

young peoples' reasons for using social media (Leung, 2013). Self-serving interests can potentially cloud Gen Z's online standards for others and blind themselves from the consequences of their own actions. This next research question aims to uncover whether or not there is a double standard amongst Gen Z when it comes to social media interaction.

RQ2: Do Generation Zers hold themselves to higher or lower social media standards than their peers?

H2: Generation Zers hold themselves to lower social media standards than their peers.

Previous studies have shown that social media can enhance relationships due to its nature of instantaneous communication and 24/7 accessibility to friends (Quan-Haase et al., 2010; Kircaburun et al., 2018). But do these new behavioral codes add or detract from the satisfaction of interacting with friends offline? Perhaps these standards create unforeseen layers of stress on friendships.

RQ3: In general, do these social media expectations create a positive or negative impact on Generation Z's real-life friendships?

H3: Social media expectations create a negative impact on Generation Z's real-life friendships.

Methodology

I created a 20-minute Qualtrics survey to test my three hypotheses. All of the participants were members of Gen Z who actively use social media on various platforms. To reiterate, this group is comprised of those born from 1997-2012. The participants were of various ethnicities, gender identities and sexual orientations. They had to be literate and fluent in English (the language the survey was administered in.) I found my subjects through word-of-mouth, social media posts, and email blasts. My goal was to have 50-100 people take the survey because this many participants would provide a wide range of responses and a relatively comprehensive understanding of Gen Z's social media expectations. In total, 84 people age 22 and younger participated in the study. The majority were college students, but several were in high school and middle school. Some of the participants were under the age of 18, but their perspective was necessary to get an accurate set of responses from Gen Z.

The survey was sectioned into three main parts. First, it asked questions that assessed the participants' demographics, social media usage, and platform preferences. The results from this section gave a high-level overview of the subjects' relationship, or lack thereof, with social media. The survey then asked questions about how the participants' social media habits have affected their well-being (decrease or increase in stress, FoMO, sleep loss). These responses showed whether Gen Z's social media usage aligned with the uses and gratifications from previous studies. The data from this section of the survey also established whether social media has generally played a positive or negative role in the participants' social life and health (RQ3).

The survey concluded with various hypothetical and real social media scenarios on Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram that the participants had to think through. I chose to focus on these three platforms because previous research indicated that these are Gen Z's preferred social media sites (Statista, 2018). If a participant did not have an account on any of the three social media platforms, they were automatically sent on to the next section.
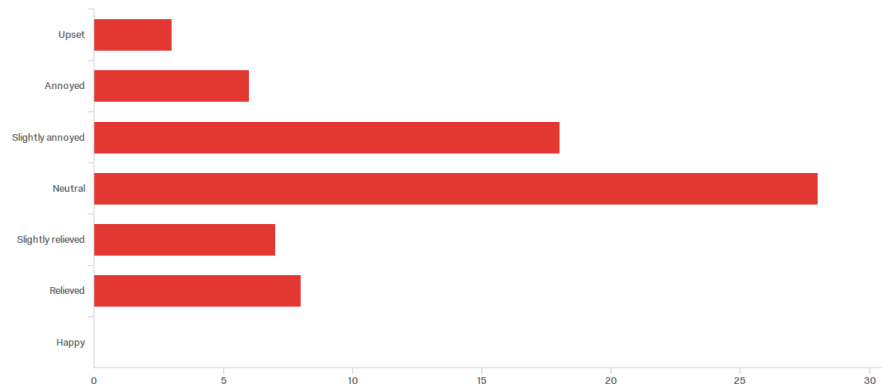
I identified various social media expectations and tested participants' emphasis/emotional response to each one through a mix of hypothetical and real-life scenarios. After the results were collected, I grouped the scenarios into six umbrella standards. The six tested expectations were the following:

1. Response Time- How quickly does someone reply to a message, tag, picture, meme, or direct message? What are the ramifications of a given waiting period?

2. Obligation to Reply- Who do participants feel a compulsion to reply to or ignore?

3. Nature of Content- What is the sentiment of a post? Who is included or omitted from that post?

4. Decision to Post- Why are certain statements or media being posted? And why not?

5. Followers' Actions- How do followers interact with someone's content? How are these actions interpreted by an individual?

6. FoMO- What aggravates or diminishes a person's sense of Fear of Missing Out?

The participants were also asked to speculate how their peers would feel or react in a given situation on each of the three platforms (RQ1). They were given a range of emotions/reactions to choose from, starting from negative and ending with positive responses. A "neutral" or "unbothered" option was always included. This answer was

crucial in order to assess whether respondents really do hold their peers to behavioral

standards. The scenario was then flipped, and the participants had to speculate how they

themselves would handle the same situation (RQ2). This section evaluated whether or

not the subjects' social media expectations have affected their real-life friendships

(RQ3). Below are a set of example questions asked for each of the three platforms. The
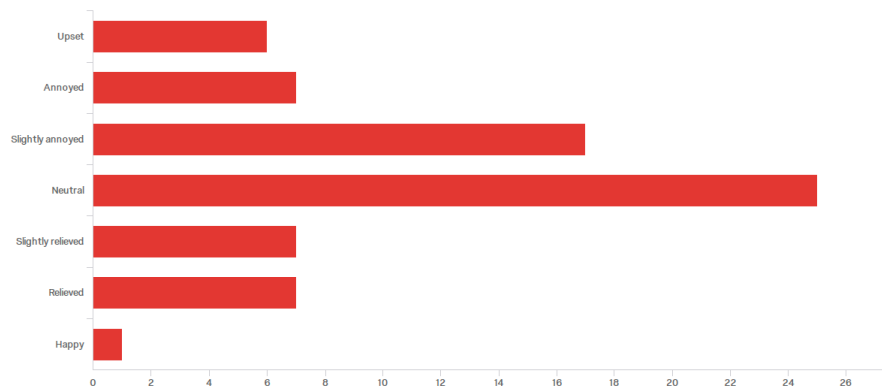
participants' responses are included in the graphs.

Q30 - You have a 50+ day Snapchat streak with your good friend Aaron. Aaron forgets to Snap you, and you lose the streak. How do you feel?

Snapchat Example Question 1

Expectation Tested- Response Time

Q31 - You have a 50+ day Snapchat streak with your good friend Sarah. One day, YOU forget to snap Sarah, and you lose the streak. How do you feel?
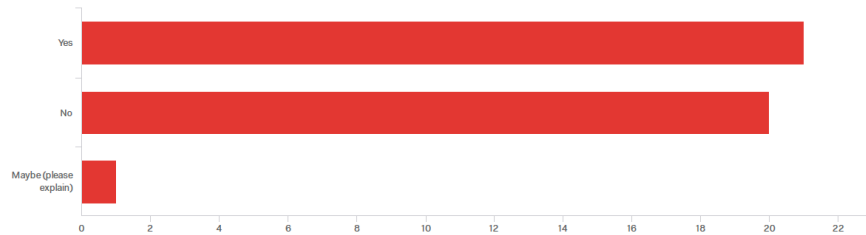

Snapchat Example Question 2

Expectation Tested- Response Time (Flipped scenario from Snapchat Example Question 1)

Q39 - Subtweeting is when someone tweets something passive aggressive directed at a
certain person or situation. Many of their followers can often relate to what is being said.
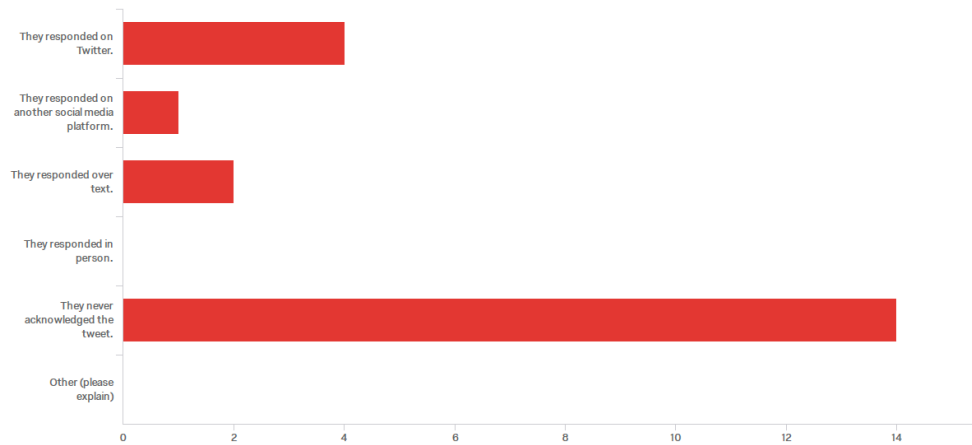Have you ever subtweeted someone before?

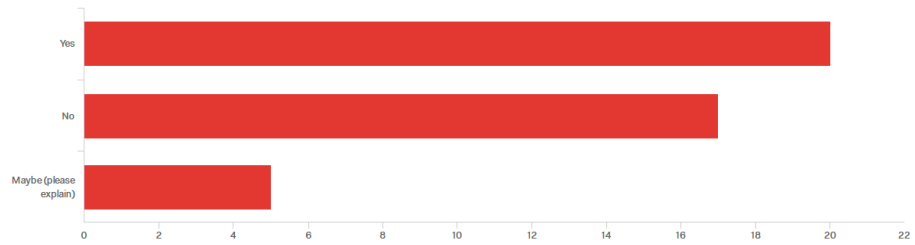Twitter Example Question 1A

Expectation Tested- Nature of Content

Q40 - If yes, did that person who you subtweeted respond?

Twitter Example Question 1B

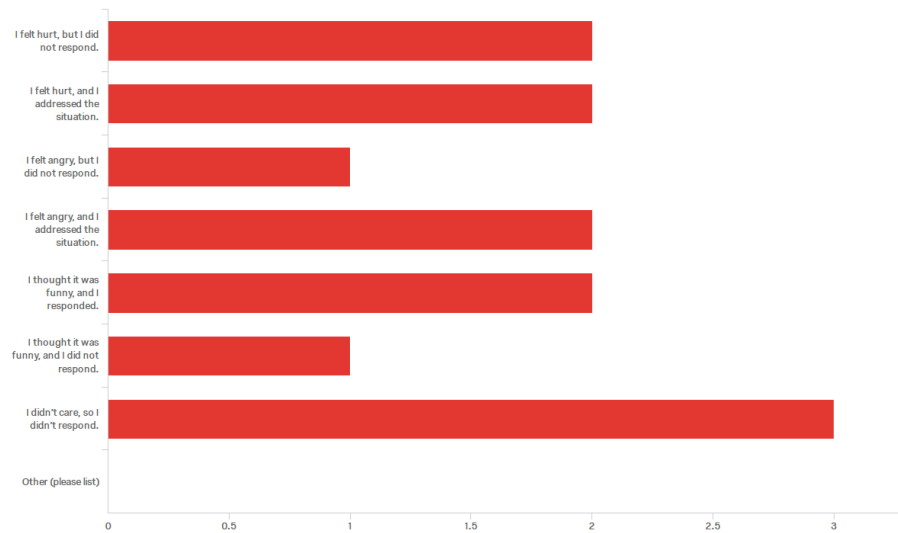Expectation Tested- Obligation to Reply

Q46 - Have you ever been subtweeted?

Yes — 20

No — 17

Maybe (please explain) — 5

(x-axis: 0, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22)

Twitter Example Question 2A

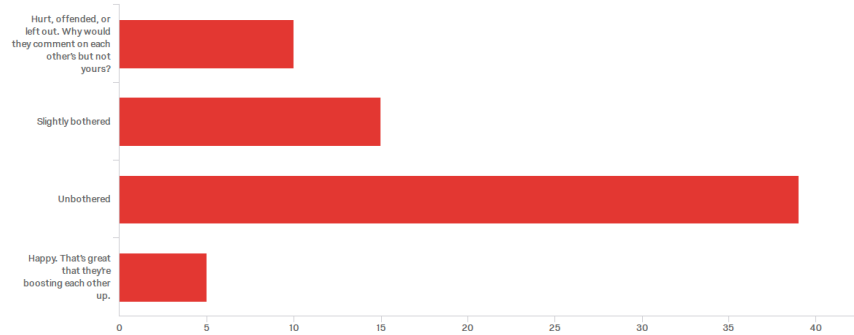Expectation Tested- Nature of Content (Flipped scenario from Twitter Example Question 1A)

Q47 - If yes, how did you feel or respond? (You may select more than one.)

I felt hurt, but I did not respond. — 2

I felt hurt, and I addressed the situation. — 2

I felt angry, but I did not respond. — 1

I felt angry, and I addressed the situation. — 2

I thought it was funny, and I responded. — 2

I thought it was funny, and I did not respond. — 1

I didn't care, so I didn't respond. — 3

Other (please list) — 0

(x-axis: 0, 0.5, 1, 1.5, 2, 2.5, 3)

Twitter Example Question 2B

Expectation Tested- Obligation to Reply (Flipped scenario from Twitter Example Question 1B)
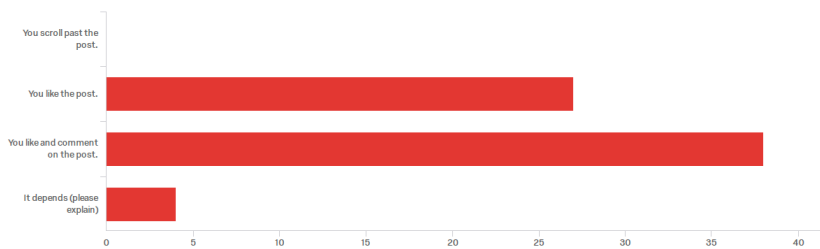
Q54 - You post a selfie on Instagram, your best friends "like" it but do not comment. You see that they've commented on each other's most recent posts. How do you feel?

Instagram Example Question 1

Expectation Tested- Followers' Actions

Q55 - Your best friend Jake posts a selfie on Instagram, how do you respond?

Instagram Example Question 2

Expectation Tested- Followers' Actions (Flipped scenario from Instagram Example Question 1)

To summarize my methodology, I created a Qualtrics survey that had three main parts. The first portion assessed participants' interaction with and habits on social media. The second part gauged how their social media use has impacted their well-being. The final and most robust section questioned their experience with social media standards on Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram. The six online behavioral expectations that I tested were Response Time, Obligation to Reply, Nature of Content, Decision to

Post, Followers Actions, and FoMO. I asked participants what their past experiences with each expectation have been. I also posed fictional scenarios in which participants had to speculate how they thought their friends would feel or react in a situation. I then flipped the scenario and asked participants how they themselves would respond in that same situation. The results, which will be discussed in the next section, supported some of my hypotheses and disproved others.

Results

H1

As mentioned in the previous section, 84 Gen Zers participated in the survey. My first hypothesis, Gen Zers have high behavioral expectations for each other on social media, came down to individual preference. This hypothesis was true in some cases and false in others. For almost every single scenario, half of the participants said that they would have an emotional reaction in a situation while the other half were unbothered by that scenario. This means that Gen Zers are divided about how they expect each other to behave on social media. If people do not meet some of Gen Z's expectations, then those Gen Zers will be emotionally troubled to a certain degree. On the other hand, many Gen Zers have no emotional investment in social media standards. There is no way to know if one's online actions might greatly impact or not bother a Gen Zer unless they are explicitly asked.

H2

The second hypothesis, Gen Zers hold themselves to lower social media standards than their peers, was proven false. If young people would react one way in a scenario, then they would expect others to react the same way in return. For example, if a participant was not bothered by their friend forgetting to open a Snapchat, then the participant was not concerned about how their friend would feel if the participant forgot to reply to a Snapchat. The opposite was also true. If a participant was annoyed at the friend for not responding to a Snapchat, then the participant was anxious about how the friend would feel if the participant was the one to forget to reply. The Golden Rule, treat

others as you want to be treated, applies not only to the real world, but also to Gen Z's online social media interactions.

H3

The third and final hypothesis, social media expectations create a negative impact on Generation Z's real-life friendships, came down to an individual basis like H1. If a participant was prone to being emotionally affected by a social media faux-paux, then they were also more susceptible to letting that negative reaction impact a friendship in real life. In general, if expectations were not met, it would cause a slight annoyance for the participant. The severity of the emotional impact was light and temporary, rarely causing enough emotional disturbance to actually end a friendship.

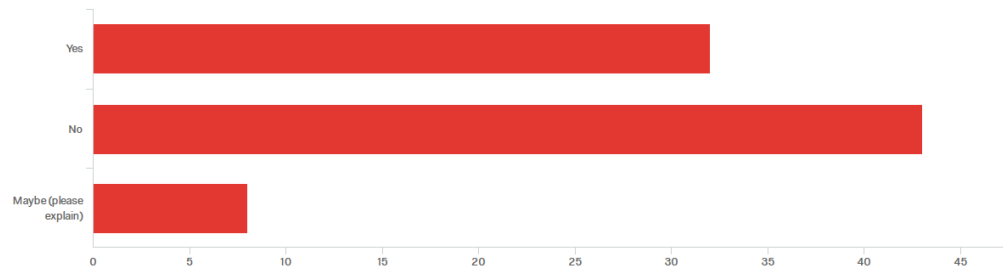**Survey Results Part 1: Gen Z's Habitual Social Media Usage**

Participants' reasons for social media usage were consistent with previous studies. In general, respondents' social media motivations were positive and self-fulfilling. They all had multiple reasons for using social media, but the four most chosen answers were entertainment, remedying boredom, habitual usage, and connection to friends. The least selected reasons were FoMO/disconnection from peers, satisfaction from getting likes on a post, and obligation to have social media for work. Platform preference was also consistent with previous studies. Instagram was the favorite platform, followed by Snapchat, Twitter, and then Facebook. Participants indicated that 87% of them were active on Instagram and Snapchat while only 52% were active on Twitter. Every participant used social media multiple times a day, and many used it multiple times per hour; but interestingly, despite their constant usage of social media, only half of the

participants stated that they had felt pressured by their peers to be active on social media.

The participants' responses regarding problematic social media usage (PSMU) were also consistent with previous research. Many respondents displayed signs of social media addiction. Several said that social media has caused them to feel increased stress. Participants said that they have felt a compulsion to scroll through their feed even when they did not want to. Many participants also revealed that social media has disrupted their daily schedules. Roughly half of participants had lost sleep over social media. The vast majority of participants had been distracted from homework because of social media. Problematic social media usage is inhibiting Gen Zers from completing essential tasks to progress through their days.

Gen Z's thoughts were divided about how their friendships in real life were impacted by social media. These findings are significant because several Gen Zers indicated that their primary gratification for using social media was to connect with their peers. The following graphs address these results:
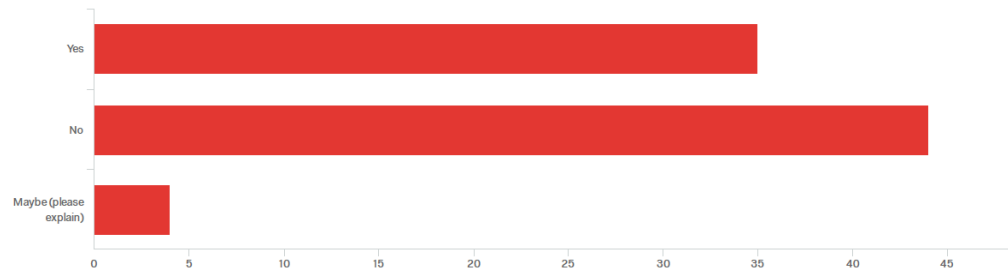
Q17 - Do you think your friendships in real life are strengthened by social media?

Friendships IRL Question 1

When asked about how social media has altered their friendships, participants were split down the middle about whether their friendships in real life are strengthened by social media. More people answered "no."
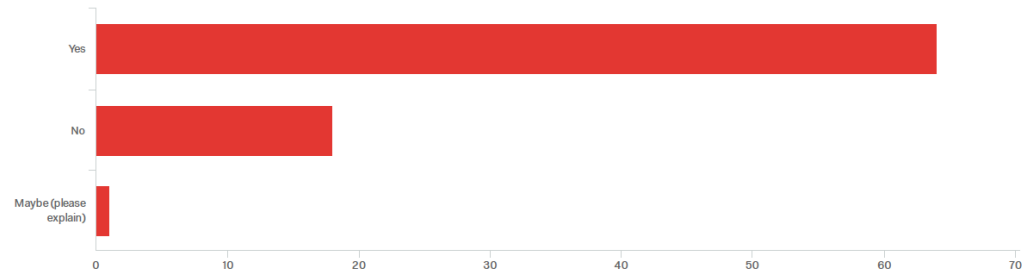
Q18 - Has social media ever negatively impacted one of your real-life friendships?

Friendships IRL Question 2

When participants were asked about whether they have had a friendship negatively impacted by social media, the answer distribution was almost the same as Friendships IRL Question 1 (above). This means that roughly half of participants have not had social media affect any of their friendships in a bad way.

Q19 - Do you know of anyone (other than yourself) who has had a real-life friendship negatively impacted by social media?

Friendships IRL Question 3

Half of participants stated that they have had a friendship negatively affected in real life because of social media (Friendships IRL Question 2), but when asked if they knew of anyone else who has had a friendship negatively impacted by social media, more than 75% said "yes."

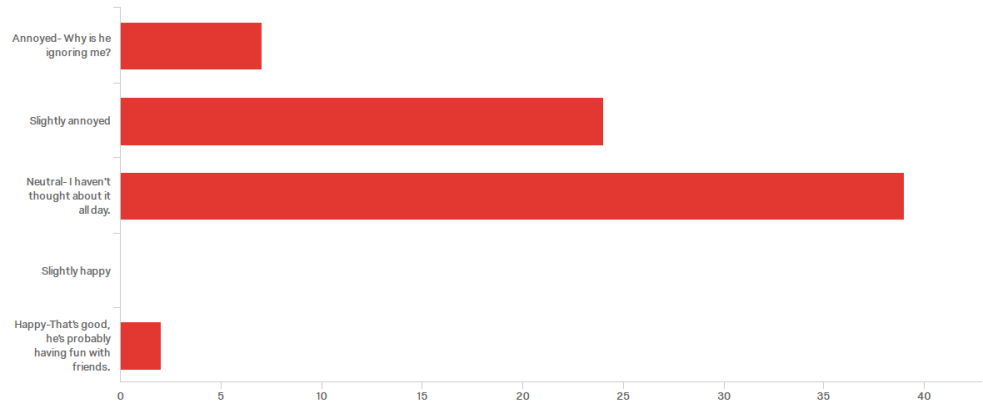## Survey Results Part 2: The Six Social Media Expectations

Of the three social media platforms tested, none stood out from the others as having more behavioral standards associated with it. Participants were emotionally invested in social media etiquette to the same degree across all three sites. As mentioned in the results for H1, half of the subjects held each other to a certain behavioral standard online while the other half did not. The following subsections will address the results for the six tested social media expectations: Response Time, Obligation to Reply, Nature of Content, Decision to Post, Followers' Actions, and FoMO.

Response Time

According to real life social norms, it is generally polite to respond to people in a timely manner. Through the survey, I investigated whether this rule applied on social

media as well. Of the three social media platforms, participants placed the highest
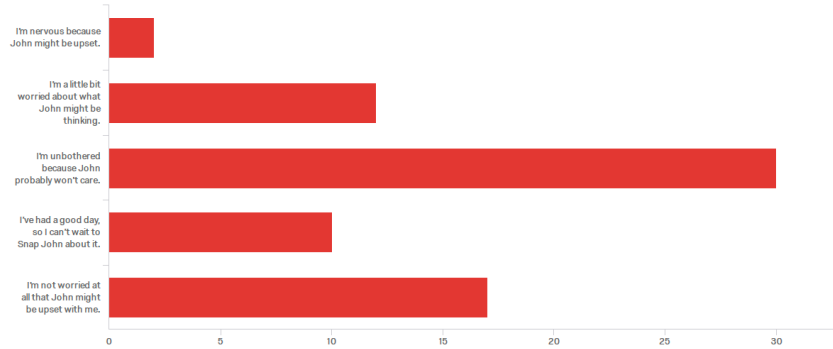
emotional value for response time on Snapchat.

Q26 - Your friend John hasn't opened the Snapchat you sent him ten hours ago. You
don't know what he has been up to today. How do you feel?

Snapchat Response Time Question

The amount of time that it takes for someone to respond to a Snapchat mattered to half
of participants. This portion of respondents did not like it when someone went for the
entire day without replying to their snapchat. There were only a few outliers who were
happy or content if someone did not reply to their Snapchat for an entire day.

Q27 - John sent you a Snapchat eleven hours ago. You haven't been on your phone all day and just saw it now. How do you feel?
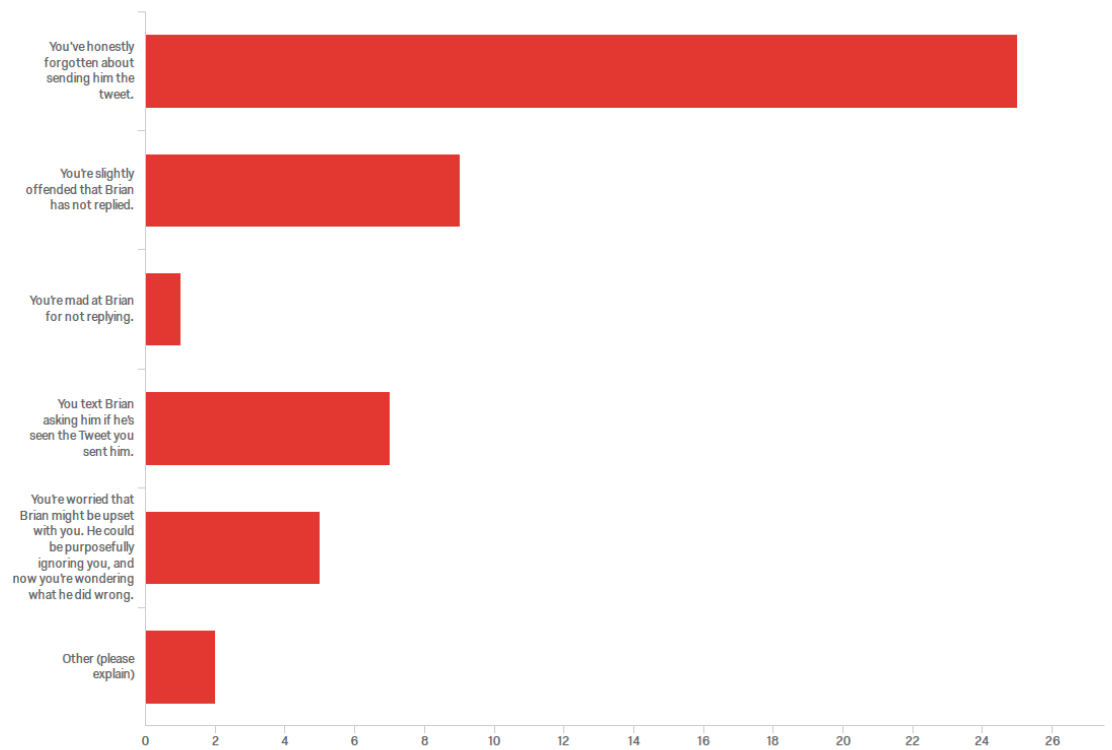
Snapchat Response Time Question- Flipped

Interestingly, when this scenario was flipped, personal response time was a lot more lackadaisical. Most participants were unbothered and not worried about how the other person would react if the participant had not opened their Snapchat all day. This set of questions was one of the few examples that supported H2 (Gen Zers hold themselves to lower social media standards than their peers.)

Of all tested scenarios, Gen Zers had the highest expectations for each other on Snapchat streaks. 40% were unbothered about losing a streak with a friend while 60% displayed an emotional reaction (see Snapchat example graphs from methodology section). Of those who had an emotional investment due to their social media standards for others, most were annoyed about losing the streak. When the Snapchat streak question was flipped, the majority of respondents were somewhere in the annoyed to upset range if they were to blame for losing the streak. Interestingly, even though the participants were disappointed in themselves, most were not worried about how the other person would feel about it. This result was one of few caveats to H2 (Gen Zers hold themselves to lower standards than their peers.) Personal response time was much more

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Response time on Twitter was not as important as Snapchat, but more emphasized than on Instagram:
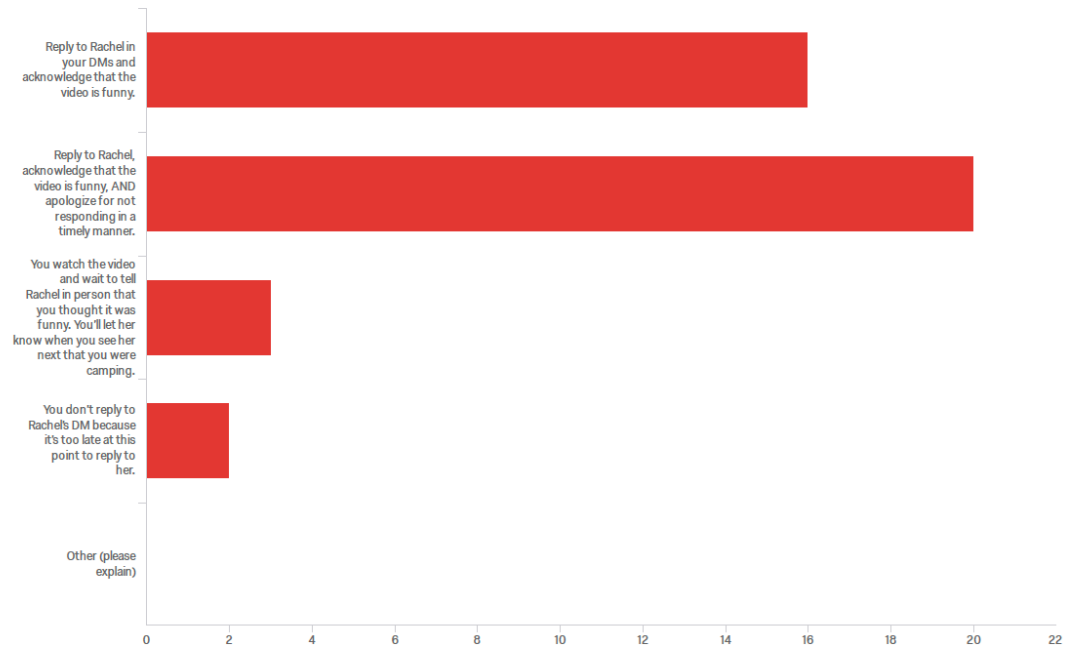
Q50 - You DM Brian a funny tweet, and Brian hasn't replied for a week. You know that Brian has been on Twitter since you DM'ed him because he has been retweeting other things. What's going through your mind? (You may select more than one.)

Twitter Response Time Question

Half of the participants truly cared if a friend did not respond for days to their direct message (DM) on Twitter. Those who cared were slightly offended or worried as to why their friend had not replied yet.

Q51 - Your friend, Rachel, DM'ed you a funny video. Your notifications are turned off, and

you've been camping for 4 days (Rachel didn't know). What do you do?

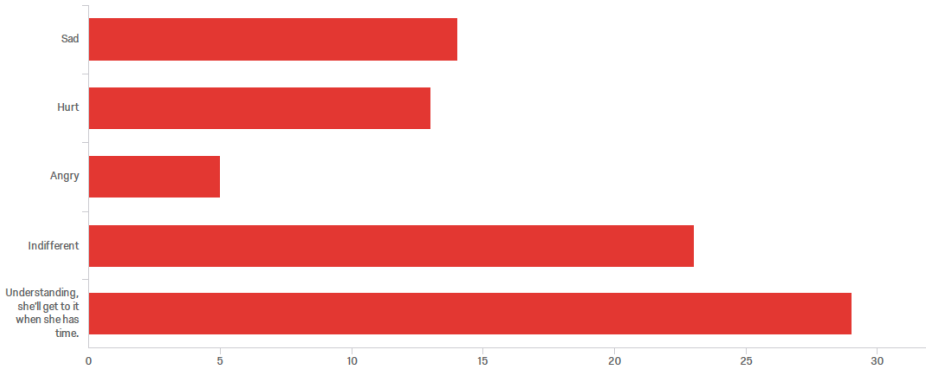Twitter Response Time Question- Flipped

When this scenario was reversed, most participants acknowledged that once they have seen a DM from a friend, they would likely offer an explanation as to why it took them so long to see it.

These responses indicate that about half of Gen Zers think about their online interactions up to multiple days later. On the other hand, the other half do not let their social media interactions occupy their thoughts, but they are still willing to offer a courtesy apology for being late with their response.

As mentioned in previous paragraphs, response time on Instagram was the most relaxed. The majority of participants were indifferent or understanding if someone was active on Instagram but had not yet replied to their text (see Instagram Response Time Question below). These answers mean that young people are empathetic and let each

other act on their own time, but a significant amount will still be sad, hurt, or angry if their peers log on to social media before replying to their text.

Q58 - You text your friend Jenn about the latest update on your love life. You're eagerly awaiting her reply. An hour has gone by, and through Instagram DMs you see that she was active 15 minutes ago. How do you feel? (You may select more than one.)
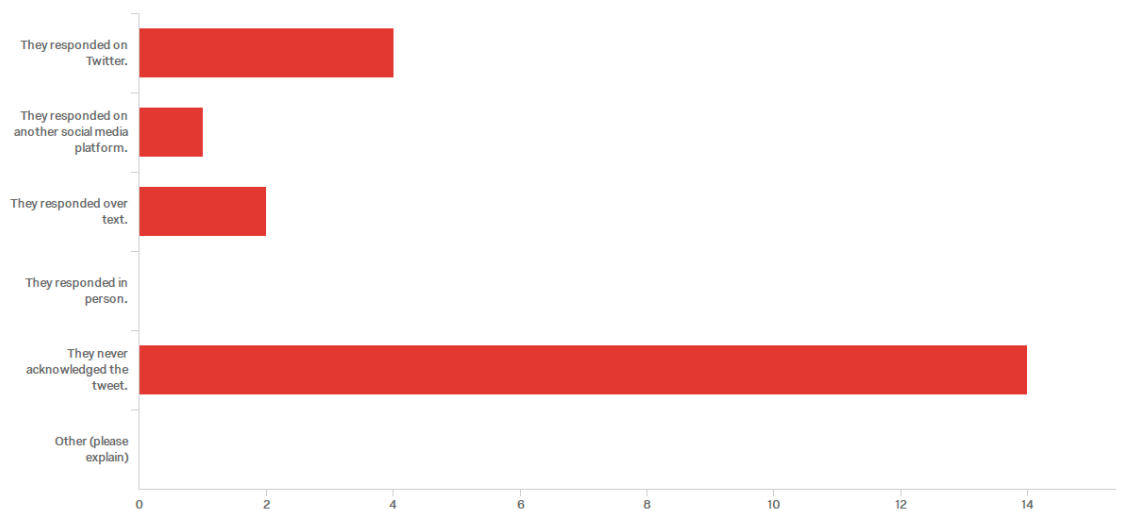
Instagram Response Time Question

Obligation to Reply

Depending on who is sending a message to a Gen Zer, they may or may not feel a need to reply. The content of a message also plays a role in whether a person feels a need to respond. I chose to focus mainly on Snapchat and Twitter for the questions that tested the Obligation to Reply expectation because these two platforms facilitate more direct interaction between peers than Instagram. On Snapchat, most participants felt a slight to moderate obligation to reply to DM's from acquaintances, but when it came to a DM from a best friend, the vast majority felt a moderate to strong need to reply. These results indicate that a Gen Zer's sense of obligation to reply directly relates to their closeness to the individual sending the message.

The obligation to reply on Twitter was much more complex because of subtweeting, which is when someone tweets something passive aggressive directed at a certain person or situation. Often, their followers can relate to what is being said. A little more than half of the subjects revealed that they have subtweeted someone before. Their primary motivation was to publicly call out a person for wrongdoing. Of those, most said that the person who it was directed at never acknowledged the tweet (see Twitter Obligation to Reply Question 1 below). The small number of people who did respond to the participant's subtweet did so over social media or text. These responses indicate that Gen Zers will address conflict digitally instead of in person. If a situation starts online, it often stays online.

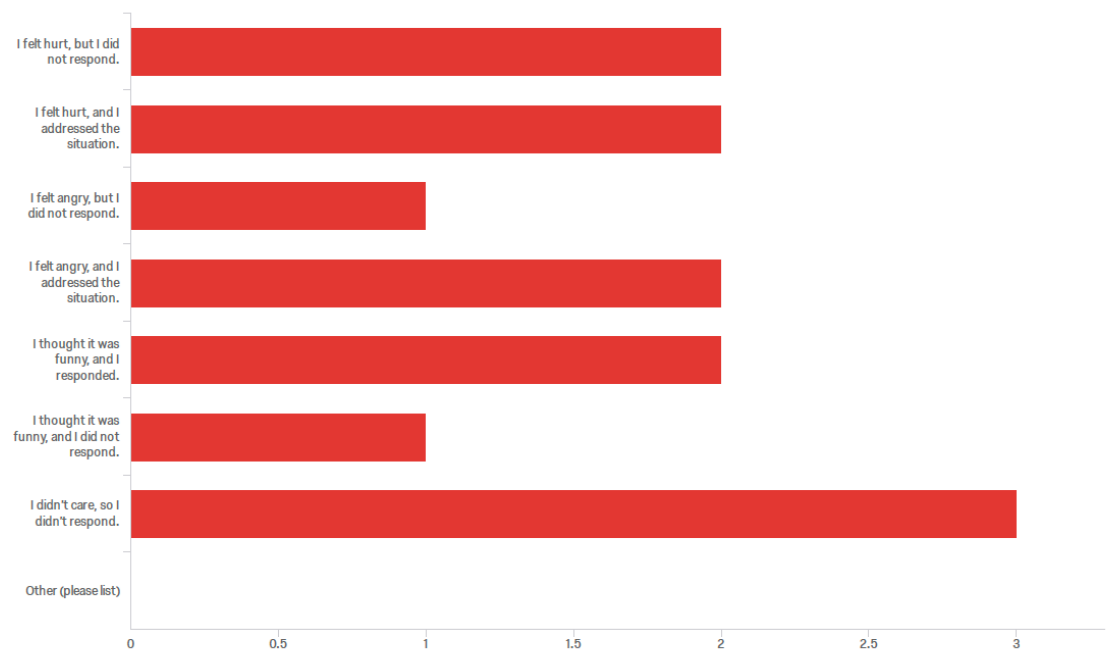## Q40 - If yes, did that person who you subtweeted respond?

Twitter Obligation to Reply Question 1

It is of note that most participants said that the person who they directed a subtweet towards never addressed the tweet, however, more than half of participants had responded to a subtweet about themselves (see Twitter Obligation to Reply

Question 2 below). Their motivations for addressing a subtweet varied greatly. Most subjects felt some sort of emotional reaction which ranged from hurt, anger, or even humor. Very few participants felt neutral about being subtweeted.

Q47 - If yes, how did you feel or respond? (You may select more than one.)

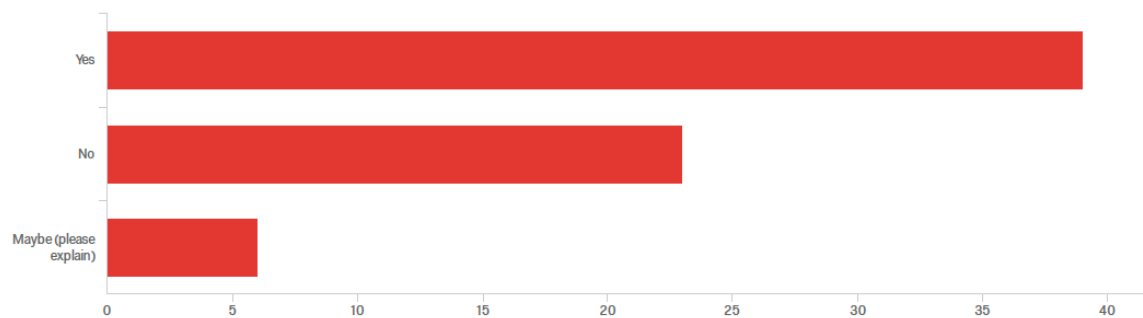| Response	Count
I felt hurt, but I did not respond.	2
I felt hurt, and I addressed the situation.	2
I felt angry, but I did not respond.	1
I felt angry, and I addressed the situation.	2
I thought it was funny, and I responded.	2
I thought it was funny, and I did not respond.	1
I didn't care, so I didn't respond.	3
Other (please list)	0

Twitter Obligation to Reply Question 2

As in real life, personal attacks online can sting. It is natural for Gen Zers to want to address someone who has said something unkind about them online. Interestingly, the majority of respondents who had subtweeted regretted doing so in hindsight. They do not wish to intentionally cause bad blood between themselves and others. If they were to see a subtweet about a friend, participants indicated that they would likely inform their friend and encourage them to address the situation. Gen Zers want to support and back up the people that they care about in the digital space the same way that they do in real life.

Nature of Content

Social media has very few restrictions, which allows Gen Zers to post virtually anything that they want. However, Gen Zers understand that the type of content that they post can affect themselves and their followers. For example, Gen Zers tend to post big life updates such as when they are starting a new job or attending a new school. If they are interested in romance, a major decision that they have to make is if they want to post a picture with a new significant other. If they decide to post a photo as a couple, their followers will then know that they are in a relationship and potentially expect updates. However, if they choose not to post a picture with their significant other, their partner might feel hurt or dejected:

Q61 - Do you think it's a big step in a romantic relationship to post your first couple picture on Instagram?
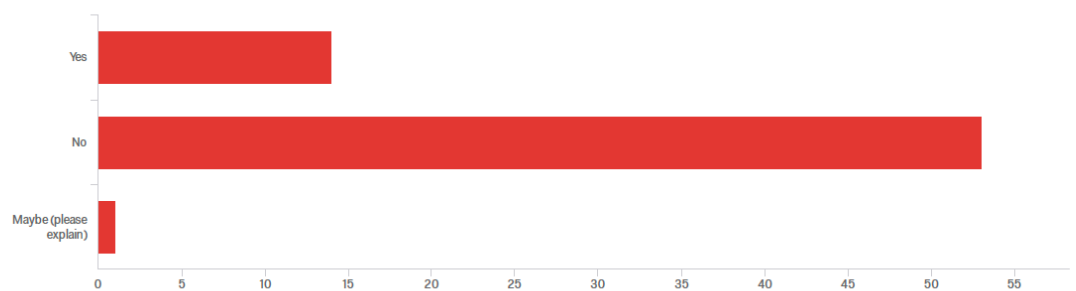

Instagram Nature of Content Question 1

The consensus among the survey respondents was that it is a big step in a romantic relationship to post your first picture as a couple.

The majority of respondents said that they would post a picture together after becoming official within a month a few months or whenever it felt right. These results

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mean that there is no real rhyme or reason behind when Gen Z's think it is appropriate to post big life updates. Most participants revealed that they had never felt pressured by a significant other to post a picture together before the participant felt ready to (see Instagram Nature of Content Question 2 below). Of the small amount who said that they had felt pressured, most said that they had posted a picture to make their romantic partner happy.
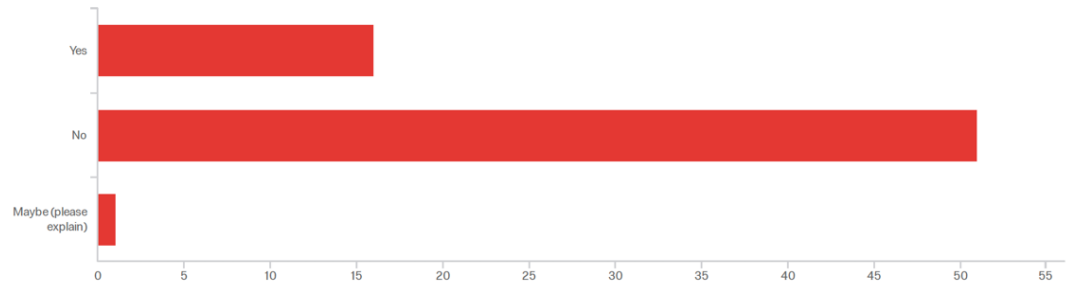
Q63 - Have you ever felt pressure from a significant other to post a photo of the two of you on Instagram before you felt ready to?

Instagram Nature of Content Question 2

When the previous scenario was flipped, most people said that they had also not pressured a significant other to post a picture of them together on Instagram (see Instagram Nature of Content Question 3 below). In reality, they respect their romantic partners' decisions to post about their relationship when the other person feels that the time is right. Gen Zers respect each other's decisions to share or withhold information, and they think through the implications of what they are posting online.

Q65 - Have you ever encouraged someone you were dating to post a photo of the two of

you on Instagram?

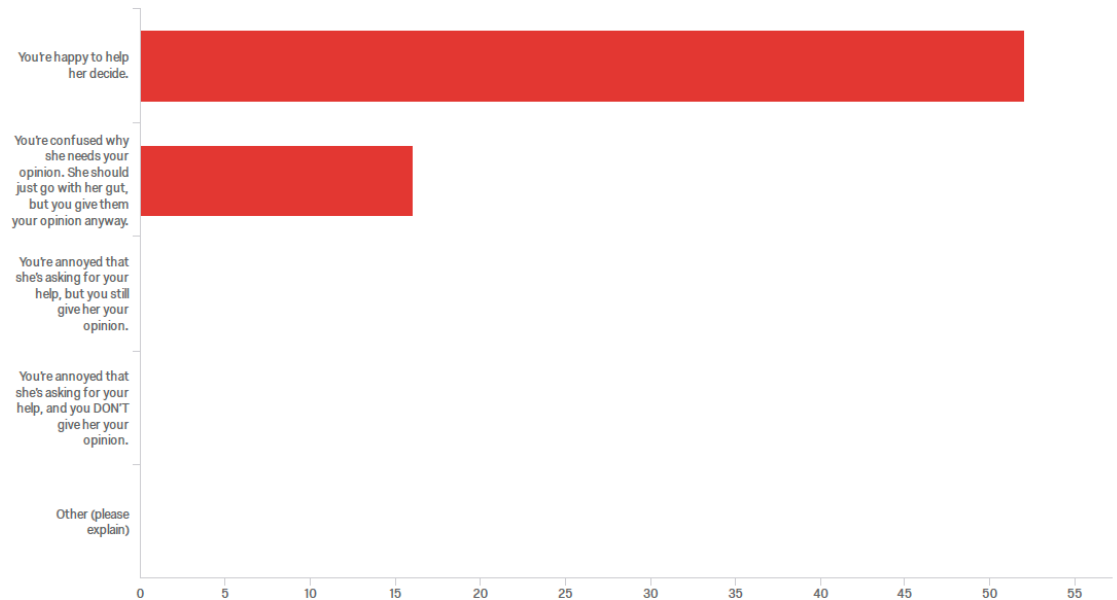Instagram Nature of Content Question 3 (Question 2 Flipped)

Decision to Post/Followers Actions

I combined the results from the Decision to Post and Followers' Actions

expectations because in most cases, these standards were intertwined. Naturally, Gen

Zers are more likely to post something based on how their followers will react to their

content. As previous studies have shown, people care about how they are perceived on

social media (Quan-Haase et al., 2010; Kircaburun et al., 2018). I homed in on

Instagram for these sets of questions because it is the most aesthetic/appearance-focused

platform due to its visual nature.

When participants were unsure whether or not to post a photo on Instagram,

most texted their friends for advice. When a friend was asking the participant for advice

about what to post, most of them were happy to help the person decide whether or not

they should post the content in question (see Instagram Decision to Post Question 1

below). These results indicate that participants care about what that they post, and they

want to feel validated that they are making curated choices on their feeds.

Q57 - Megan texts you asking your opinion on if she should post a selfie on Instagram.

How do you react?

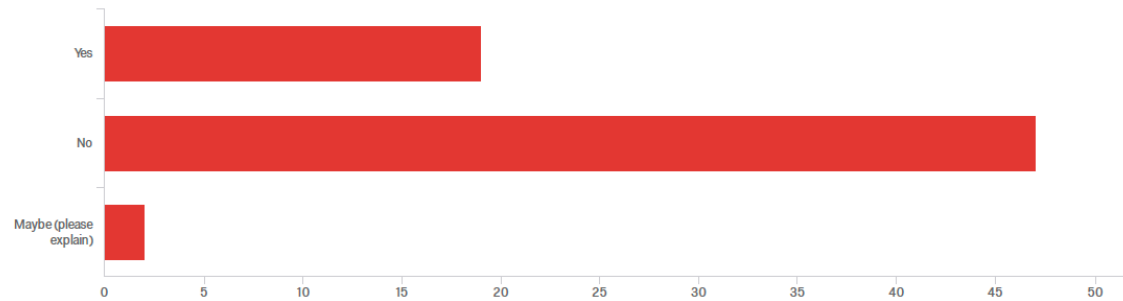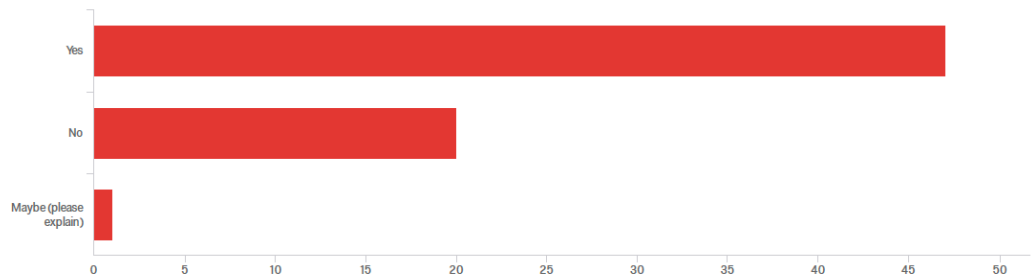Instagram Decision to Post Question 1

Most of participants had not texted a friend to "like" a photo on Instagram or interact with a tweet. On the flip side, the majority of respondents had been texted by a friend asking them to "like" their photo on Instagram (see two graphs below). The Gen Z participants valued people interacting with their posts naturally instead of forcefully and artificially.

Q67 - Have you ever texted a friend asking them to like your photo?

Instagram Followers' Actions Question

Q69 - Has someone ever texted you asking you to like their photo?

Instagram Followers' Actions Question- Flipped

Most participants did not differentiate sentiment between "liking" versus commenting on a friend's post. When participants were asked their preference on how they want their friends to respond to their content, most appreciated similar treatment amongst their close circle of friends. For example, if the participant hypothetically had two best friends who were consistently liking and commenting on each other's posts, then the participant expected those two people to like and comment on their own posts as well. This particular expectation could be an indicator of FoMO. Gen Zers fear that if their friends are not treating them the same online as other people, that their relationship is not as valued or as important to that person.

FoMO

Nearly 75% of participants have experienced FoMO because of social media; but on the contrary, the majority of respondents noted that avoiding FoMO was a motivator for being present on social media. This conflicting set of responses are surface-level indicators of harm to well-being due to problematic social media usage (PSMU). The FoMO specific questions in the scenario section of the survey were tailored solely to Snapchat, the most informal and casual platform. Gen Zers post pictures and videos to their stories in the moment without much prior thought, which can unintentionally cause frustration and hurt among their peers. In addition, transparency is added to friendships because the Snap Map reveals where your friends are at any given moment. Despite high levels of FoMO, 70% of respondents opted out of being visible on the Snap Map. The main reason for choosing to not be visible was privacy. These results mean that privacy generally trumps FoMO. Gen Zers are not willing to compromise their security comfort level in order to feel more in the loop with their social circles online. This social standard questions previous studies that claim that the privacy paradox is a problem amongst young people (Quinn, 2016).

While most people are not affected by Snap Map FoMO, that is not the case for who is included in Snapchat videos. In real world group settings, many respondents were bothered if they were not included in their friends' social media content from that gathering (see Snapchat FoMO Question below). Gen Zers have to be conscientious of who they are tagging/including on posts related to a social gathering. If someone is left out on social media, they may feel upset or anxious about not being included.

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Q35 - You're out with your group of friends. You and Alice are sitting in the corner of the room chatting, and everyone else is hanging out in the center of the room. Someone in the middle of the room takes a front camera Snapchat video for their story. They twirl the phone around the room asking everyone to say hi. Due to your position in the room, you and Alice are the only ones not included in the video. How do you feel?

Snapchat FoMO Question

To remedy making their friends feel left out, Gen Zers sometimes temporarily blocked each other from being able to view their Snapchat stories. Half of respondents indicated that they have done this. Most said that their reason for blocking the friend was that they did not want the friend's feelings to be hurt. This result means that Gen Zers will exclude others from seeing their content in order to avoid hurting their feelings in real life.

Discussion

This study clearly pinpointed the hidden social media expectations that Generation Z members have for each other on social media. It turns out that these standards vary on an individual basis as well as per platform. As mentioned in previous sections, 84 Gen Zers participated in a survey that gauged their uses and gratifications for social media and how these motivations have affected their well-being. The survey concluded with questions that evaluated how the respondents and their peers would react in real-life and hypothetical scenarios on Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram, which are the three most popular social media sites among Gen Z (Statista, 2018). The following six social standards were tested in the survey: Response Time, Obligation to Reply, Nature of Content, Decision to Post, Followers' Actions, and FoMO. Remarkably, for each of the six expectations, Gen Zers were divided on what the behavioral standards truly are. This generation of young people have never been formally taught how online social standards differs from real world etiquette. Consequently, Gen Zers are not on the same page about what is and is not acceptable online. The social media rule book is convoluted and murky. Young people either do not care at all or care deeply about how they expect others to act on social media. If clear standards are not laid out, this could cause an increase of frustration and anxiety amongst young people for years to come.

While this study filled a void of research about how Generation Z expects each other to behave on social media, there are ways that this study could be improved. In retrospect, the questions could have been designed more strategically to have the participants delve deeper into each scenario. The questions succeeded in evaluating how

a situation made a participant feel, however, there could have been more follow up questions about *why* the participant felt that way. For example, even if half of the participants felt bothered in a given situation, there reasons for feeling that way could all be different. It would have been interesting to ask the participants to explicitly state the motivation behind their feeling. In the present study, I think that self-reporting bias did come into play. I am not sure that participants would be totally honest with their answers if they were asked to delve deeper into why they felt a certain way. However, I think that a self-reporting bias would be minimized if the researchers in a new study ensured that responses were anonymous and that the survey was completed individually.

Another aspect that could have been improved in this research was the ratio of questions for each of the six expectations. Sometimes, I chose to only ask about certain expectations on only one or two of the platforms. The results would have been more comprehensive if I asked an equal number of questions about each expectation per platform. Another improvement that could be made is getting a wider age range of Gen Z participants. As mentioned in the methodology section, most of my respondents were college students. I suspect that if I had an even number of middle school, high school, and college-age individuals taking the survey, the results would have been a more accurate representation of Gen Z's social media expectations as a whole. With more time, I would have liked to test if Gen Z's social media standards correlate to factors that negatively impact their health and well-being. If I had thought about this before writing the survey, I could have coded the responses to reveal or refute a relationship between the expectations and problematic social media usage.

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There are several ways in which other researchers can build upon this study. The first would be to compare the significance of each expectation against each other. It would be worthwhile to figure out how the tested standards rank from most to least important to Gen Z. This information would help Gen Zers understand what social media behaviors matter most to their peers. Researchers could also conduct surveys testing only one of the six social standards. An individual expectation could have countless scenarios that range in impact and complexity. If separate research was done on each of Gen Z's social standard, it would further our understanding of how this generation expects each other to behave online. These studies would also aid in explicitly laying out the ramifications of breaking these unspoken rules.

This study holds much significance in both the professional and private sphere. Advertising and public relations professionals can use this information to help make their content on social media more effective towards Gen Z. PR in particular is about building relationships, and social media is the most direct way that brands can interact with Gen Z. The six tested social media standards from this study can aid PR professionals who are running companies' social media accounts in creating better, more authentic bonds with their Gen Z audience. The following list lays out the PR implications that this study uncovered:

1. Response Time- As Gen Zers value promptness, PR professionals should respond in a timely manner, preferably the same day to comments on social media.

2. Obligation to Reply- Gen Zers reply to subtweets and other negative posts about themselves online. In the same way, PR professionals should reply to everyone, even the unfavorable comments. Clear, open communication is key to maintaining trust with the consumer. PR

professionals should aim to remedy wrongdoing and repair relationships with their Gen Z audience.

3. Nature of Content- In the survey, Gen Zers indicated that they use social media for entertainment over news. In order to connect with young people online, PR practitioners should aim to post funny, inspirational, and relatable content instead of hard-hitting, heavy information.

4. Decision to Post- Gen Zers text each other for advice when they are unsure about whether they should post something. Brands should mimic this behavior for their social media accounts. PR professionals should unsure that nothing goes public online until multiple people have seen and approved the content.

5. Followers' Actions- Gen Zers do not differentiate between "likes" versus comments. They place value simply on any sort of engagement or interaction with their friends' content. Therefore, PR professionals should not read too much into "likes" versus comments. If Gen Z appreciates a brand's posts, then they will interact with it in some sort of fashion.

6. FoMO- In the same way that Gen Zers are not willing to sacrifice their privacy to mitigate FoMO, brands should not compromise their morals or integrity on social media. PR professionals should not forcefully insert themselves into pop culture to stay "on trend." For example, if an icon dies, a brand should not post about the death of that individual unless they had some sort of direct connection to their brand. Actions such as this come off as fake to Gen Z. They prefer when brands stay genuine and stick to their mission on social media.

The implications that this study has on advertising is a bit broader than PR since advertising professionals are not directly interacting with Gen Z on a daily basis. Advertisers craft campaigns to make a connection with the consumer. The following three social media standards from this study are the ones that apply the most to advertising because they can aid advertising professionals in making social media ads more effective:

1. Followers' Actions- Gen Zers discuss their thoughts openly on social media. If they feel strongly about an advertising campaign, they are likely to say something about it online. This is why it is crucial for advertisers to monitor social media response to a campaign. When Gen

Zers talk about advertisements on social media, the campaign reaches an even larger number of their followers and social circles. Even if the campaign does not contain social media deliverables, generating online buzz should always be an objective.

2. Nature of Content- In this study, Gen Zers indicated that they use social media to stay in touch with their friends and to cure boredom. Therefore, advertisements with interactive and shareable features will do well. In addition, brand ads targeting Gen Z should be current and fun.

3. Decision to Post- Gen Z sorts through a vast amount of content on their social media feeds every day. In order for an advertisement to be memorable, there has to be a "wow" factor. If not, Gen Z is likely to scroll past an advertisement fairly quickly and not remember the message.

The results from the present study have personal implications as well. The results reiterate how important it is for Gen Zers to speak with their peers if something happens on social media that bothers them. As in the real world, clear communication is vital to maintaining healthy relationships. Gen Zers should think through how their online actions might be perceived by their friends. However, it is not worth it to let an inconsequential social media faux-paux ruin a friendship. Nevertheless, Gen Zers should think through how their behavior on social media might be perceived in order to avoid upsetting or bothering others. Even if this might seem like an unnecessary, cumbersome task to an individual, it might spare their friend from experiencing negative emotions such as worry or anxiety.

In addition, the participants' problematic social media habits were consistent with previous studies. Their dependency on social media detrimentally affected their health (loss of sleep, distraction from studies, social media addiction, etc.). Older generations must understand that the worry and anxiety that some members of Generation Z feel over social media is real and valid. Young people need their parents

to help guide their decisions in real life and online. Older people have a responsibility to teach their children how to use social media as a tool for fostering healthy friendships. Habits like subtweeting and blocking friends from viewing Snapchat stories can cause animosity between people. If Gen Zers are up front with each other about their feelings and expectations, then a friendship fallout can be avoided. Generation Z must be reminded for their own well-being to base their sense of self-worth and value on friendship in reality.

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