THE THEORY OF GENERATIONAL STRATIFICATION IN THE CONTEXT OF BRAND MARKETING COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

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Abstract: T*he generational approach is becoming widely used to revise patterns in brand value building and management. The need for such revision is a logical consequence of the current situation, where traditional branding principles fail. As turbulent changes are occurring in the macro environment due to the (post)pandemic situation and global socio-economic development, more and more voices are beginning to point out the different natures of the problem. One solution is the application of the generational approach to the practice of brand managers. Thus, strategies would become more personalized and fit crucial market segments focusing on the increase of subjectively perceived brand value. On the other hand, some concepts and theories which have not been checked functionally in the long term perspective, and which have started to be prematurely applied*

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in specific managerial tasks, are being critically discussed. One of such concepts involves the usage of generational stratification in the practice of marketing managers. Thus, the aim of this paper is to analyze the concept of fitting brand marketing communication strategy to the specifics of a targeted generational cohort. Subsequently, this study aims to critically discuss the concept of generational stratification from the point of view of brand management. To fulfill this aim, the method of contingency table evaluation and hypotheses testing via chi-squared tests is used. Data were collected via a consumer questionnaire survey among Slovak inhabitants aged 15 years and above, involving 1,978 respondents in total. Based on this research, it is concluded that generational stratification is not relevant for the purposes of brand marketing communication strategy. On the one hand, its general applicability is proved, but on the other – in selected product categories (personal cars, banks, cola beverages and sportswear) – the link between generation and perception of brand value is not proved.

Keywords: *generational stratification, marketing communication, brand management, branding, baby boomers, generation X, generation Y, generation Z*

JEL classification: M30, M31, M37, Z00, C00

1. Introduction

In marketing, the generational approach has begun to be a widely used reasoning for observing exceptions from managerial and economic concepts that were so far generally perceived as valid (Signore et al., 2021). Recently, it has also been discussed in the scope of the market consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic – not only from the point of view of the creation of a new generation influenced by the relevant socio-economic crisis and subsequent significant changes (Schramm et al., in press), but also as a phenomenon creating the need to revise the previously formulated theoretical background of the concept of generational stratification and its implementation in managerial practice (Leko Šimić & Pap, 2021; Balinska & Jaska, 2022). This fact is changing the position of the concept of generational stratification in the theoretical platform of the creation of managerial patterns (Nica et al., 2022; Birtus & Lazaroiu, 2022). While the generational approach has been one of various equivalent trends until now, it has recently started to be revised as a traditional concept (Andriulis et al., 2022). To conclude this situation, it can be stated that the concept of generational stratification has been indirectly included into the pillars of managerial theory, especially in the scope of marketing and the general managerial implications of consumer behavior. Surprisingly, this has occurred without proving the real significance of the generational approach in the scope of selected marketing issues. One of such issues is branding. This issue is constantly increasing in its importance by entering into other managerial disciplines and the business functional architecture. Thus, this paper is focused on the analysis of the concept of fitting brand marketing communication strategy into the specifics of a targeted generational cohort. Only by proving the link between the perception of brand value sources and the affiliation of a consumer of a specific generation, along with the theoretical flow of revising the concept of generational stratification for branding purposes under the influence of changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, would this argument be reasoned and useful for the purposes of a real managerial response to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research gap lies in the absence of the verification of the usability of the concept of generational stratification for detecting the specifics of market reactions in the application of selected managerial patterns. This is especially true in those cases where these concepts have previously been successful. Thus, the aim of this paper is to analyze the concept of fitting a brand marketing communication strategy into the specifics of a targeted generational cohort.

2. Literature review

The concept of generational stratification was originally developed in the scope of labor market implications (Soulez & Guillot-Soulez, 2011). Despite the fact that this concept has since been relatively widely incorporated into other managerial theories – especially in terms of marketing (Pileliene & Zikiene, 2019) – its labor market nature still intermittently appears in contemporary scientific literature from different perspectives (Lizbetinova et al., 2018; Machova & Kosar, 2018; Mahmoud et al., 2021). Moreover, generational stratification rises in importance not only in general terms, but also in relation to its marketing implications (Nguyen et al., 2022). One such dimension of the applicability of the concept of generational stratification is branding.

The golden triangle of branding is still the main topic of current research in this area. This triangle is formed by brand value, brand image and brand quality (Bilan et al., 2019). Syah and Olivia (2022) analyzed these three components of brands, focusing on the online fashion industry in Indonesia. Thus, they continued the cross-market prospective of branding research, focusing not only on markets in their region but also in their sectoral structure. Similarly, this trend was also followed by Bonney et al. (2022), who focused on the consumer perception of a brand in the conditions of a specific market. However, the analysis of a specific market is abstracted from the identification of inner common mechanisms across specific product categories. Such an approach would be beneficial from the point of view of wider managerial implications. Husain et al. (2022) applied the categorical perspective of the triangle of the functional mechanisms of branding, focusing on luxury brands. Thus, the trend of switching from analysis of specific product categories into a wider context has been outlined.

In fact, there are two main ideological flows of incorporating the concept of generational stratification into branding. On the one hand, authors focus on the specifics of generations across selected marketing phenomena and managerial patterns (Costa et al., 2019). On the other hand, the reactional mechanisms of generations to selected established marketing phenomena and managerial patterns are analyzed. Thus, Kisieliauskas and Jancaitis (2022), for example, aimed their research at the analysis of the impact of green marketing on perceived brand value in different generations. While the difference between these two approaches seems be solely formal at first, more detailed analysis of the nature of the approaches outlines the significant difference. This difference lies in the importance of the concept of generational stratification – whether it is an explanatory or an explained phenomenon.

Similarly, Davidaviciene et al. (2019) also focused on the influence of social media on generation Y consumer purchase decisions. However, they form a special flow of the second mentioned approach as they analyzed only one selected generation – generation Y, born between 1977 and 1994. In this case, the generational restriction could be caused by the expected social media literacy of the population, although the age level of social media users is increasing. In this case, an approach based on the sub-segmentation of generation Y based on their preferences

towards individual social media platforms would be beneficiary. Such an approach has been applied by Roth-Cohen et al. (2022), who analyzed the responses of generation X, Y and Z members to mobile advertising.

It is obvious that marketing communication is at the center of the interest of scientific research when the concept of generational stratification is analyzed in terms of marketing (Garbarova & Vartiak, 2022). However, there is also another marketing tool which starts to be analyzed in the scope of the specifics of individual generational segments. This is product – especially service as intangible product (Shams et al., 2020). The explanation of this fact lies in the strong communication potential of product itself in case of services, where their intangibility causes many specifics of marketing management. In the wider perspective, it could be said that in case of services both product and communication policy have strong relations to the brand value subjectively perceived by consumers. Traditionally, brand value sources have been individually identified in various contextual concepts respecting the specifics of markets across regions and sectors where brands are operating. The brand value concept, which has universal applicability, was originally created by Aaker (2012), and its validity across regional and sectoral markets has not been denied so far despite the fact that it has been specified by many authors for the needs of the individual characteristics of markets. Its main pillars are: 1) attitudes; 2) attributes; 3) benefits; and 4) imageries, which are formed by individual factors relevant for each sector in respect to the product category on the market. These brand value sources have already been generally analyzed in the context of marketing communication effectiveness and their mutual functional mechanisms. AL-Nsour and AL-Sahli (2022) analyzed the effects of cash and non-cash communications on brand awareness via empirical evidence from Saudi Arabia. Alakkas et al. (2022) focused on the moderating effect of marketing communication and brand identity on corporate social responsibility and firm-based brand equity. However, previous research by the authors of this article has indicated that the importance of brand value sources varies across product categories. Thus, implications for marketing communication and brand value building and management activities based on this marketing tool should also not be uniform, and they should fully respect the individual architecture of the importance of brand value sources and their components (Kliestikova et al., 2019; Majerova et al., 2020; Gajanova et al., 2021).

Thus, it is obvious that there are three autonomous research flows: 1) brand value and marketing communication; 2) brand value and generational stratification; and 3) generational stratification and marketing communication. Their analysis has not only a general character but is also realized in terms of selected markets (regionally as well as by sector). However, a gap in contemporary research has been identified – the analysis of mutual interactions between brand value perception and generations, with implications for marketing communication in terms of brand value building and management purposes. Such an approach would be beneficial, especially from the point of view of brands which are facing the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic by trying to explain the functional shortages of thus far valid managerial patterns through the nature of the concept of generational stratification. Only by proving the dependence of the perception of brand value sources and the affiliation of the consumer to the specific generation, along with the theoretical flow of revising the concept of generational stratification for branding purposes under the influence of COVID-19 changes, would this argument be reasoned and useful for the purposes of management facing the consequences of COVID-19. However,

the presumption of the authors tends, on the basis of the literature review, towards the critical questioning of the general applicability of the concept of general stratification for the purposes of the generational adaptation of communication activities of brands.

3. Methodology and data

The data were collected via a questionnaire survey focused on the identification of brand value sources not only in general, but also those which are relevant for specific product categories. The questionnaire is a standard tool for consumer research that it allows a huge quantity of relevant data that can be subsequently statistically tested and later on used as an optimal platform for general statement formulation to be collected. Originally, the questionnaire was a part of wider research focused on the identification of brand value sources among markets and products. However, based on data mining approach, the questionnaire was selected as a suitable source of information to fill the research gap identified in this paper. The structure of the questionnaire was as follows: 1) general perception of brand value sources; 2) perception of brand value sources across product categories; 3) demographic identification of the respondent. The specifics of the research presented in this paper involve a focus not primarily on the product categories but on the brand value sources and their relevance for generational cohorts. Thus, the questionnaire was restructured to fit the aim of the research, and the issues which were analyzed were as follows: 1) general preferences of branded product; 2) perception of selected brand value source – imageries in general and across product categories; 3) perception of selected brand value source – attitudes in general and across product categories; 4) perception of selected brand value source – attributes in general and across product categories; 5) perception of selected brand value source – benefits in general and across product categories; 6) general factors influencing respondents' decision making in selected product category.

The questionnaire was first applied in 2017, and since then it has been repeated as a tracking study. Thus, evolution over time can be observed. However, for the purposes of this paper, the data from before 2020 are relevant as the aim of the paper is to prove the significance of generational stratification in the scope of branding implications before the impacts and malformations of COVID-19 were present. This was realized as a computer-assisted web interview (CAWI method) on a socio-demographic sample of 1,978 respondents. These respondents were Slovak residents older than 15 years of age. Such an age limit was set because of the assumption of autonomous buying behavior – 15 years is considered to be a basic age limit to be able to enter into some form of labor contract according to the Slovak legal system. However, in the scope of generational stratification analysis presented in this paper, such a restriction logically causes the exclusion of generation alpha (born in 2011 and later on). Thus, this generation is not included in the research despite the fact that it is a theoretically recognized generation with significant specifics. Specifically, generations are defined as follows:

- baby boomers: born in 1946–1964;
- generation X: born in 1965–1976;
- generation Y: born in 1977–1994;
- generation Z: born in 1995–2010.

The product categories were set to reflect specific patterns of consumer buying behavior: 1) complex buying behavior (passenger cars); 2) dissonance-reducing buying behavior (banks);

3) habitual buying behavior (cola beverages); 4) variety-seeking buying behavior (sportswear). These types of buying behavior were established on the basis of the level of commitment of the consumer in the process of buying behavior and the differences between brands operating on the market. According to Garbarova et al. (2017), in existing types of buying behavior, the following characteristics are relevant: 1) complex buying behavior (high commitment/significant differences); 2) dissonance-reducing buying behavior (high commitment/insignificant differences); 3) habitual buying behavior (low commitment/insignificant differences); 4) variety-seeking buying behavior (low commitment/significant differences).

Statistical analysis of the data of obtained from the questionnaire is based on contingency tables. The formulated hypotheses are statistically tested within this framework by applying chi-squared tests (Krizanova et al., 2014). Specifically, the chi-squared test of independence between two categorical variables was applied (Parobek et al., 2016). The chi-squared test of independence is the best-known statistical method for evaluating qualitative data from questionnaire surveys. This method has been tested in practice in countless empirical studies. At the same time, the method is built on rigorous statistical theory and enables the exact statistical testing of formulated hypotheses. The chi-squared statistic is calculated as follows:

$$\chi^2 = \sum_{i=1}^{m} \sum_{j=1}^{n} \left[\frac{\left(O_{ij} - E_{ij} \right)^2}{E_{ij}} \right]$$

where

O_{ij} is the observed frequency in the *i*-th row and *j*-th column of a contingency table;

E_{ij} is the expected frequency in the *i*-th row and *j*-th column of a contingency table;
m is the number of rows and n represents the number of columns in a contingency table.
Expected frequencies in contingency tables are calculated according to the formula:

$$E_{ij} = \frac{O_{i\bullet} \cdot O_{\bullet j}}{N}$$

where

$O_{i\bullet} = \sum_{j=1}^{n} O_{ij}$ is the sum of observed frequencies in the *i*-th row;

$O_{\bullet j} = \sum_{i=1}^{m} O_{ij}$ is the sum of observed frequencies in the *j*-th column;

$N = \sum_{i=1}^{m} \sum_{j=1}^{n} O_{ij}$ is the total number of observations.

If the null hypothesis H_0 : 'Categorical variables are independent' is true, then the chi-

squared statistic χ^2 has a chi-squared distribution with $k = (m-1) \cdot (n-1)$ degrees of free-dom, i.e., $\chi^2 \sim \chi^2(k)$. The critical region is defined as $\left(\chi^2_{1-\alpha}(k); \infty \right)$, where $\chi^2_{1-\alpha}(k)$ is called a critical value and is obtained as $(1-\alpha)$-quantile of the distribution $\chi^2(k)$, α being the level of significance (α = 0.05). The null hypothesis is rejected if $\chi^2 \in \left(\chi^2_{1-\alpha}(k); \infty \right)$, otherwise it is not rejected.

The aim of the statistical analysis was to answer the following questions:

Are there differences in perceiving sources of brand value between different generations?

Are these differences between generations stable in time?

In total, around 60 statistical hypotheses were tested in the article, as a corresponding hypothesis was assigned to each question from the questionnaire. Explicitly stating all 60 formulated hypotheses would be confusing on the one hand and, on the other hand, it would not be possible from the point of view of the necessity of not exceeding the permitted scope of the article. However, the exact form of each specific hypothesis follows immediately from the nature of the chi-squared test of independence of two variables of a qualitative nature and from the specific formulation of the given question in the questionnaire survey, all of which were presented in the article. When using the chi-squared test of independence of two qualitative variables, the null and alternative hypotheses are always formulated in the following general form:

H0: the tested variables are independent;

H1: the tested variables are dependent.

One of the two qualitative variables is always the "generation" variable. The second variable depends on the specific question from the questionnaire. If, for example, the questionnaire question "Indicate to what extent you agree with the statement: I prefer branded products" is analyzed, then the null and alternative hypothesis have the following form:

H0: the degree of agreement with the statement "I prefer branded products" does not depend on the generation;

H1: the degree of agreement with the statement "I prefer branded products" depends on the generation.

4. Results

There is a great variety of different aspects of brand value and its sources. Technically, the answers to each question from each questionnaire (performed in 2018 and 2019) are expressed as a categorical variable (or a set of categorical variables). Each categorical variable is then combined together with the generation variable to form a contingency table within which the chi-squared test of independence is performed to test the formulated hypotheses.

4.1. Preferences of branded products

Three categorical variables were obtained for the three statements presented in the question focused on the identification of the extent to which respondents agree/disagree with the selected statements on the Likert scale, where 1 means *strongly disagree* and 5 means *strongly*

agree. These statements were:

- I prefer brand-name products.
- I consider brand-name products to be superior in quality.
- Brand-name products provide me with a prestige and image, which are important to me.

Two categorical variables were obtained for the remaining questions focused on the identification of: 1) the characteristic with the highest influence on choice of brand (product, price, place, promotion); and 2) the reason that would induce change in favorite brand (quality, price, availability, image). Each was combined with the generation variable to obtain the corresponding contingency table. For illustration, the first contingency table is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Contingency table for the variables of generation and preference of brand-name products (based on a questionnaire from 2018).

Generation	I prefer brand-name products					Sum
	1	2	3	4	5	
Baby boomers	38	89	193	100	18	463
Generation X	39	83	215	92	34	705
Generation Y	64	154	259	167	61	372
Generation Z	45	97	109	98	23	438
Sum	186	423	776	457	136	1,978

Source: Authors' own calculations.

Data in this contingency table represent observed frequencies O_{ij}. The sums in the final row $O_{i\bullet}$ and column $O_{\bullet j}$ were used to calculate expected frequencies E_{ij} according to formula .

The chi-squared test statistic χ^2 was then obtained from .

The same calculations were performed for the remaining categorical variables, and the results are summarized in the following table. The level of significance is α = 0.05 in all cases. Symbols *, ** and *** denote that the result is significant at 10%, 5% and 1% level of significance, respectively. The results of the chi-squared test for questions focused on the preferences of branded products are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of the chi-squared test for questions 1–3.

Statistic	2018					2019				
	Question					Question				
	1a)	1b)	1c)	2	3	1a)	1b)	1c)	2	3
χ^2	42.01	11.42	22.08	11.47	42.93	41.84	37.34	24.49	20.40	45.35
	***		**		***	***	***	**	**	***

Source: Authors' own calculations.

The null Hypothesis H_0 : 'Answers to given question don't depend on generation.' is rejected in all cases except for questions 1b) and 2) in the project from 2018. Therefore, the way respondents answered these questions depended on the generation in most cases.

Perception of selected brand value source: imageries

Respondents were asked to select what shopping for brand-named products causes them to feel: 4a) prestige, 4b) happiness, 4c) enthusiasm, 4d) expectations, 4e) satisfaction, 4f) blame, 4g) confidence, 4h) modern, 4i) positive associations, or 4j) memories. Questions 4a)-4i) were asked for a general brand-name products. Some of these questions were also asked for specific kinds of products:

personal cars: prestige 4a), modern 4h), confidence 4g), memories 4j), satisfaction 4e);

banks: prestige 4a), expectations 4d), satisfaction 4e), confidence 4g), positive associations 4i);

cola beverages: happiness 4b), expectations 4d), satisfaction 4e), confidence 4g), positive associations 4i);

sportswear: prestige 4a), happiness 4b), expectations 4d), confidence 4g), modern 4h).

The reason for such a limitation of the prospective answers to be selected was caused by the specifics of product categories – i.e., if all the general answers would be used in case of all the product categories, the logic of such a construct would be lost. The results of the performed chi-squared test for the general and all the specific cases are summarized in Table 3. The cell is left blank if the question was not asked.

Table 3. Results of the chi-squared test for the items in question 4 in the questionnaire.

$\div^2$		Question									
Year	Product	4a)	4b)	4c)	4d)	4e)	4f)	4g)	4h)	4i)	4j)
2018	general	35.09 ***	13.67	34.19 ***	36.57 ***	15.23	12.25	40.23 ***	23.30 **	28.20 ***	
	personal cars	22.12				24.21 *		32.86 ***	19.57		15.83
	banks	24.40 *			44.85 ***	34.50 ***		35.30 ***		28.80 **	
	cola beverages		18.30		17.77	24.40 *		36.74 ***		27.55 **	
	sportswear	43.07 ***	20.77		31.59 ***			25.41 **	17.35		

2019	general	33.22 ***	24.34 **	35.94 ***	20.62 *	23.25 **	23.42 **	24.54 **	25.25 **	19.46 *	
	personal cars	22.38 *				11.63		14.60	9.38		23.82 *
	banks	17.05			14.92	24.76 *		17.39		14.11	
	cola beverages		20.54		30.79 ***	8.96		18.98		25.96 **	
	sportswear	31.93 ***	24.51 *		25.09 **			23.42 *	18.06		

Source: Authors' own calculations.

Generally, the results show that the way respondents answer questions 4a)–4i) was mostly dependent on generation, and that the dependence was seen more often in 2019 than in 2018. Nonetheless, this result does not hold in the case of specific types of products. In the area of personal cars, the results mostly show independence in both years. In the field of banks, the results are rather unstable over time. Stability of the results can be seen in the area of sportswear.

4.2. Perception of selected brand value source: attitudes

Respondents were asked to select their attitudes towards brand-name products. They were asked both for a general type of product and for specific types of products – personal cars, banks, cola beverages and sportswear. Prospective answers to be chosen were the following:

- 5a) I intentionally buy brand-name products;
- 5b) I am interested in brand-name products regularly;
- 5c) Brand-name products catch my attention as I consider them superior in quality;
- 5d) Brand-name products catch my attention as I consider them more prestigious;
- 5e) I am interested in brand-name products only rarely.

The results of the performed chi-squared test of independence of answers to these questions on generation is summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of the chi-squared test for questions relevant to attitudes.

$\div^2$	2018					2019				
Product	Question					Question				
	5a)	5b)	5c)	5d)	5e)	5a)	5b)	5c)	5d)	5e)
general	16.68	24.40 **	24.32 **	24.26 **	33.38 ***	46.31 ***	50.54 ***	25.75 **	20.18 *	16.90

personal cars	47.63 ***	31.38 ***	31.46 ***	36.74 ***	38.56 ***	76.28 ***	32.75 ***	30.37 **	36.21 ***	27.69 **
banks	51.16 ***	32.30 ***	48.68 ***	46.37 ***	53.73 ***	28.27 **	25.46 **	29.68 **	21.09	25.16 **
cola beverages	67.10 ***	44.32 ***	45.47 ***	40.57 ***	39.30 ***	67.61 ***	44.20 ***	60.34 ***	40.28 ***	14.73
sportswear	56.11 ***	33.18 ***	43.87 ***	32.06 ***	30.11 **	52.63 ***	44.51 ***	24.49 *	31.87 ***	32.44 ***

Source: Authors' own calculations.

The results clearly show that the answers to these questions about respondents' attitudes are dependent on generation in most cases.

4.3. Perception of selected brand value source: attributes

Respondents were asked to select their expectations about brand-name products: 6a) popular, 6b) available, 6c) modern, 6d) superior, 6e) innovative, 6f) improving the image, 6g) good quality to price ratio, 6h) catching the attention, 6i) creative in advertisements, and 6j) supporting the national economy. Questions 6a)–6i) were asked for a general brand-name product. Some of these questions were also asked for specific kinds of products:

- personal cars: popular 6a), modern 6c), image 6f), quality 6g), creative in advertisement 6i);
- banks: available 6b), innovative 6e), image 6f), quality 6g), creative in advertisement 6i);
- cola beverages: popular 6a), available 6b), innovative 6e), quality 6g), creative in advertisement 6i);
- sportswear: popular 6a), modern 6c), quality 6g), catch my attention 6h), creative in advertisement 6i).

The reason for such a limitation of the prospective answers to be selected was the specifics of product categories – i.e., if all the general answers would be used in all the product categories, the logic of such a construct would be lost. The results of the performed chi-squared test for the general and all the specific cases are summarized in Table 5. The cell is left blank if the question was not asked.

Table 5. Results of the chi-squared test for the items in question 6 in the questionnaire.

$\div^2$		Question									
Year	Product	6a)	6b)	6c)	6d)	6e)	6f)	6g)	6h)	6i)	6j)
2018	general	33.37 ***	18.19	28.83 ***	14.42	22.70 **	21.66 **	21.66 **	30.90 ***	22.09 **	13.63
	personal cars	23.95 *		45.72 ***			35.14 ***	41.61 ***		30.41 **	
	banks		29.69 **			34.90 ***	35.91 ***	41.93 ***		26.19 **	
	cola beverages	38.21 ***	19.93			38.63 ***		34.48 ***		50.81 ***	
	sportswear	27.13 **		19.28				21.40	20.24	34.73 ***	
2019	general	36.76 ***	22.71 **	38.41 ***	21.20 **	13.49	22.30 **	28.29 ***	15.97	15.67	22.97 **
	personal cars	32.12 ***		6.92			19.37	15.83		15.71	
	banks		20.70			28.85 **	45.27 ***	16.35		18.85	
	cola beverages	15.94	12.51			34.50 ***		21.21		21.48	
	sportswear	19.06		12.44				32.33 ***	20.08	33.10 ***	

Source: Authors' own calculations.

The results show that the answers to questions about respondents' expectations are mostly dependent on generation, but only in the case of general product. In the areas of personal cars, banks and cola beverages, the results are rather unstable in time – results from the 2018 project suggested dependence on generation in these areas, while the project from 2019 seems the contradict these previous results quite often.

4.5. Perception of selected brand value source: benefits

Respondents were asked to identify relevant benefits of brand-name products via stating how strongly they agree/disagree with the selected benefits on the Likert scale, where 1 means

strongly disagree and 5 means strongly agree. These statements were: 7a) causing happiness, 7b) increasing social status, 7c) facilitating process of making new friends, 7d) catching the attention of others, and 7e) belonging to the lifestyle of respondents. The respondents were asked both for a general type of product and for specific types of products – personal cars, banks, cola beverages and sportswear. The results from the performed chi-squared test of independence of answers to these questions on generation are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Results of the chi-squared test for questions relevant to benefits.

$\div^2$	2018					2019				
Product	Question					Question				
	7a)	7b)	7c)	7d)	7e)	7a)	7b)	7c)	7d)	7e)
general	34.19 ***	13.88	25.85 **	12.71	28.87 ***	40.96 ***	35.90 ***	31.69 ***	28.50 ***	52.65 ***
personal cars	33.53 ***	51.43 ***	30.36 **	44.42 ***	32.42 ***	34.89 ***	19.39	28.86 **	26.99 **	34.44 ***
banks	24.71 *	37.67 ***	47.07 ***	33.52 ***	50.35 ***	24.61 *	34.58 ***	33.43 ***	28.51 **	35.72 ***
cola beverages	48.48 ***	35.02 ***	41.72 ***	34.72 ***	33.67 ***	45.49 ***	32.04 ***	28.37 **	24.94 *	15.79
sportswear	36.95 ***	23.27 *	28.27 **	20.94	45.62 ***	41.06 ***	17.34	40.35 ***	14.66	60.00 ***

Source: Authors' own calculations.

The results clearly show that the answers to these questions about respondents' utility from brand-name products are dependent on generation in most cases.

4.6. Factors influencing respondents' decision making in selected product category

Respondents were asked to select the category of products where their shopping behavior is mostly influenced by brand (personal cars, banks, cola beverages, sportswear). Subsequently, they were asked to identify the most valuable brand in the categories. The list of brands was limited and the brands were included based on two conditions – 1) operating in the national market and 2) being listed among the most valuable brands according to the rankings realized in the Slovak Republic.

The results of the chi-squared test for questions focused on the preferences of branded products are shown in Table 7.

Table 7 Results of the chi-squared test for questions 8–9.

Statistic	2018					2019				
	Question					Question				
	8	9a)	9b)	9c)	9d)	8	9a)	9b)	9c)	9d)
χ^2	52.98	51.29	157.22	58.89	103.60	38.04	79.78	174.90	86.95	92.66
	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***

Source: Authors' own calculations.

This table illustrates that the answers to these questions about factors influencing respondents' decision making in selected product categories are dependent on generation in all cases, even at the 1% level of significance.

Discussion

The findings of the research invalidate Leko Šimić and Pap (2021) and Balinska and Jaska (2022), who highlight the need for the revision of the thus far formulated theoretical background of the concept of generational stratification and its implementation into managerial practice. However, this is not a general statement, but is focused on the practice of branding where significant implications for the theory and practice of marketing communication could be identified (as has been already noted in wider socio-economic context by Andronie et al., 2021 and Nica et al., 2021). From the point of view of the research of the concept of generational stratification, the complex approach of Roth-Cohen et al. (2022), who analyzed responses across generations and not separately like Davidaviciene et al. (2019), has been proved a prospective one for the purposes of further research in this area. This is because such a complex approach helps to identify hidden mechanisms of generational reactions to the selected activities of a company. In terms of this paper, this approach has been developed, and not only generations in their plurality have been analyzed, but also at a specific point in time focusing on the years before the COVID-19 crisis. This was performed in order to discuss the real importance of the concept of generational stratification, as it has been questioned in the light and shadow of its explanatory and explained nature, which has been significant for Bonney et al. (2022) and Husain et al. (2022). Moreover, the branding research approach of AL-Nsour and AL-Sahli (2022) and Alakkas et al. (2022), based on the cross-market approach where not only region but also sector should be taken into account to develop functional branding strategy in terms of marketing communication, has been also verified. Referring to Aakers's (2012) quadratic typology of shopping behavior depending on the degree of engagement and differentiation and the national socio-cultural profile of the Slovak Republic, relevant sources of brand value were identified in the context of individual types of shopping behavior alternatively (see Fig. 1).

	High commitment	Low commitment
Signifi-cant dif-ferences between brands	benefits	imageries
	imageries	attitudes
	attitudes	benefits
	attributes	attributes
Small dif-ferences between brands	benefits	imageries
	imageries	benefits
	attitudes	attributes
	attributes	attitudes

Figure 1. Sources of brand value in the context of a typology of shopping behavior
Source: Authors' own processing according to Kliestikova et al. (2019); Majerova et al. (2020); Gajanova et al. (2021).

For individual product categories in the context of the typology of purchasing behavior, it could be stated that:

- for complex buying behavior and dissonance-reducing buying behavior where the representative products are passenger cars and banks, it should be respected that the dependence between generation and its perception of brand value source is present in both cases – in the general approach as well as in the case of individual product categories;
- for variety-seeking buying behavior and habitual buying behavior where the representative products are sportswear and cola drinks, it should be respected that the dependence between generation and its perception of brand value source is present only in the general approach, not in the case of individual product categories.

From the point of view of managerial implications, it is important that the character of the product category should be taken into account when the concept of generational stratification is reconsidered for application. However, this should be done not specifically, but in wider schemes of consumer behavior to make it easier for brand managers to apply revised patterns. In this form, the activities of marketing communication could be fitted to the specific conditions of the brand with respect to the relevance of the concept of generational stratification for the perception of individual brand value sources which should be communicated or forced in their perception by consumers. While in case of complex buying behavior and dissonance-reducing buying behavior the concept of generational stratification is relevant and should be fully respected in the process of setting marketing communication, in the case of variety-seeking buying behavior and habitual buying behavior this concept is irrelevant. This is because, in this case, imageries are the main brand value source, and for them the concept of generational stratification is valid only in gen-

eral. However, it would be also interesting to extend the range of analyzed generational cohorts and to focus on generation alpha (consumers born from 2010 onwards) and the so-called silent generation (1928–1945). Despite the fact that these generations can be considered marginal, they should not be ignored as they are present on the market. A very specific category of implications is created by the social aspect of the selected phenomenon. The generational stratification approach has so far been considered a reasoning for many malformations of the application results of managerial patterns. Age is considered a standard demographic variable with a significant impact on consumer behavior. Similarly, other demographic variables with assumed impacts on consumer behavior should also be critically revised. One of such a variables is gender. However, actual trends tend to the phenomenon of gender equality. Thus, the situation is different in comparison with generational stratification. While age is considered to conform to cluster consumers according to this criterion, in the case of gender, the bipolar structure (or tripolar – male, female, other) is to be avoided, and consumers should not be clustered according to this criterion. Based on the results of the authors' previous research, the specification of gender approach applications in the scope of marketing communication and other fields of marketing and managerial theory and practice should also be realized. On the other hand, further research into this issue should be developed mainly regarding to the national psychographic specifics of consumers. This paper has been focused on the Slovak market conditions and, thus, it could be assumed that the findings would not be valid in markets with significantly different psychographic profiles of consumers. Also, when considering products and services designated for the foreign market despite the fact that originally they would be placed on the national market, it should be revised whether the application of research findings would be beneficiary due to the existence of national specifics of consumer perception.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to analyze the concept of fitting brand marketing communication strategy to the specifics of a targeted generational cohort. To fulfill this aim, the method of contingency table evaluation and hypotheses testing via chi-squared tests was used. Data were collected via a consumer questionnaire survey that took place among Slovak residents older than 15 years, with a total number of 1,978 respondents. It was established that generational stratification is only generally relevant for the purposes of brand marketing communication strategy. On the contrary, in selected product categories (personal cars, banks, cola beverages and sportswear), the dependence between generation and its perception of brand value source was not proved – especially in case of brand value source attributes and imageries. This finding is crucial, especially for those brand categories where these brand value sources are the most important for the processes of brand value building and management. However, there is still a robust theoretical background which should be revised in detail in the scope of the applicability of the concept of generational stratification in the practice of branding regarding the national psychographic characteristics of the market.

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