Are we Baby Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y? A qualitative inquiry into generation cohorts in Malaysia

Hiram Ting [a, *, 1], Tze-Yin Lim [b, 1], Ernest Cyril de Run [b], Hannah Koh [b], Murni Sahdan [b]

[a] Sarawak Research Society, Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia
[b] Faculty of Economics and Business, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Notwithstanding the prevalent use of generation labels and descriptions from U.S. sources in the marketing literature and segmentation practices in Malaysia, there is an extreme lack of studies that justify such adoption with theoretical support and empirical evidence. The present study was performed to explore generation cohorts in Malaysia using sociological theories of generations as the underpinning basis. The purpose was to identify the major external events which have impacted Malaysians during their formative years and to define actual generation cohorts in the Malaysian context. A qualitative approach via personal interview was administered and 80 nationwide interviews were conducted and audio-recorded. The data were then transcribed and analyzed using content analysis with the aid of the ATLAS.ti software. The findings suggested that the experiences of external events which Malaysians have are different from the experiences of the U.S. population. As such, five generation cohorts were proposed based on the collective experience of the events which transpired during the formative years respectively. The study not only unearthed actual Malaysian generation cohorts, it can also pioneer future investigation pertaining to generation cohorts in Malaysia and the use of generations in various studies and practices.

Introduction

Marketers and business practitioners for many years have used demographic and psychographic variables to segment and target consumers (Kotler & Armstrong, 2011; Scardino, 2004). Due to the dynamic nature of the contemporary market, it has always been a challenge to understand and serve the target segments and consumers at large continually with long term success. Consumers today are more diverse and savvy than ever, hence they demand products (both goods and services) that suit their values and lifestyles (Meredith & Schewe, 2002). As such, knowing them and satisfying their needs and wants by segments in a delicate and purposeful manner still prove to be pivotal to an effective marketing strategy and subsequent business success.

Despite the complexity of the market, a hybrid segmentation approach using a generation cohort is emerging as an innovative and highly successful alternative. Generation segmentation identifies and explains the values which act as the drivers of behaviours (Meredith & Schewe, 2002). It is asserted that generation is superior to

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: hiramparousia@gmail.com (H. Ting), tzeyin78@hotmail.com (T.-Y. Lim), drernest@unimas.my (E.C. de Run), ingingkoh@yahoo.com (H. Koh), murni.sahdan@gmail.com (M. Sahdan).
Peer review under responsibility of Kasetsart University.
[1] Co-first authors.

demographic variables such as age and life cycle stages since it reveals more than what a general population trend does, such as the consumers' lifestyles (Schewe, Meredith, & Noble, 2000). Therefore, generation labels, including Baby Boomers, Generation X (Gen X) and Generation Y (Gen Y) from the U.S. sources, are frequently studied and employed in marketing research and segmentation strategies, respectively, not only in the U.S. but also in other countries (Meredith & Schewe, 2002; Noble & Schewe, 2003; Yu & Miller, 2003). These labels are used to distinguish cohorts of individuals based on their generational experiences and characteristics. It provides researchers and business practitioners a firm foundation to understand and predict consumer behaviour, and to develop effective segmentation strategies accordingly.

With no exception, the researchers and practitioners in Malaysia have picked up the generation labels from the U.S. literature, and used these materials at learning institutions, to conduct research and carry out segmentation activities (Eze, Tan, & Yeo, 2012; Lim, Yap, & Lee, 2011; Munusamy, Arumugam, & Rahim, 2010). Unfortunately, such convenient adoption is all but without theoretical basis (de Run & Ting, 2013). Essentially, the fundamental notion of generation cohort is that individuals are shaped and formed by their personal attachment to the historical and societal events which transpired during their formative years (Holbrook & Schindler, 1989, 1994). Since the events in the U.S. and those in Malaysia cannot be wholly identical, categorizing the Malaysian cohorts by merely using an age variable of the U.S. population, like birth year, does not reveal its actual generational orientations and characteristics. Hence, the assumption that the generation characteristics which are used to describe the U.S. population are applicable in the Malaysian context is categorically unfounded and profoundly misleading. Consequently, what is taught at the learning institutions on the subject matter, the basis on which the respondents from different generations are profiled in social science research and the manner by which segmentation is administered in the marketplace in Malaysia, require immediate consideration.

To date there has been little reported research carried out to explore and determine actual generation cohorts in Southeast Asia, including Malaysia. Studies on Malaysian generation cohorts have been eventually pioneered by de Run and Ting in recent years, (2013, 2015), but the scope and findings are limited to a state in Malaysia. As such, the present study is considered as the first attempt to unearth actual generation cohorts in Malaysia which has been surprisingly overlooked by researchers and practitioners in the country and the region. Sociological theories of generations are adopted as the underpinning basis to identify the major events which have impacted Malaysians in the past 80 years (Rogler, 2002). Given the nature of the research problem, a qualitative approach was utilized to address two propositions. Firstly, it was proposed that the major external events which Malaysians are attached to experientially were different from those of the U.S. cohorts, the latter of which is well documented in the literature. Secondly, the collective yet distinctive experiences of the major external events of Malaysians during their formative years would define the generation cohorts in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Generation Cohort Theory

A generation cohort is a concept that explains how a group of individuals are homogenous not only because they are born during the same period of time, but more importantly share similar experiences of some major external events during their late adolescent and early adulthood years (also known as formative years or coming-of-age, which is about 15–25 years old) (Meredith & Schewe, 1994; Ryder, 1965). Hence, the collective experiences of historical and societal events they have create cohesiveness in values, beliefs, and lifestyles which distinguish one generation cohort from another (Rogler, 2002). Evidently, the impact of such events which they experienced during the formative years is found to remain relatively stable throughout their lives regardless of life cycle stages (Inglehart, 1997; Strauss & Howe, 1991).

The sociologist, Mannheim (1952), introduced the concept of generation in an essay entitled *The Problem of Generations* and developed a generation cohort theory to explain the phenomenon. He emphasized the significance of social factors in human critical developmental stages in shaping generations. Inglehart (1997) further expanded the theory and argued that generational values emerge from impactful events, such as economic changes, major social movements, and historical events which occur especially during one's pre-adult years. According to Strauss and Howe (1991) and Rogler (2002), cohort's values and attitudes are shaped and determined by their attachment to the external events when the cohort members come of age, and these values have a significant effect on their lifestyles and tend to stay with them permanently. Since every generation cohort is formed collectively, individuals in the same cohort are expected to share similar value orientations among themselves but which are different from those in other cohorts. Researchers then popularize the theory by proposing a generational framework for the U.S. population, which is widely adopted by many countries, including Malaysia.

Generation Cohort Studies

Given the certainty of generations and its usefulness in practice, researchers began to see the need to identify the actual generation cohorts in their own countries. Apart from the studies in and about the U.S. (Holbrook & Schindler, 1989, 1994; Schindler & Holbrook, 1993), generational studies have been conducted in Russia (Schewe & Meredith, 2004), Brazil (Rubens & Motta, 2005), China (Egri & Ralston, 2004; Hung, Gu, & Yim, 2007), France (Excousseau, 2000; Treguer, 2008), the Netherlands (Ester, Vinkenand, & Despstraten, 2000), and England, Germany, and Japan (Schuman, Akiyamaand, & Knauper, 1998; Scott & Zac, 1993). Despite the effect of some global events and changes, the presence of regional events and local customs means that generation labels and characteristics in these countries cannot be entirely similar to those of the U.S. (Holbrook & Schindler, 1989). Given the prevalent use of the U.S. generation cohorts, the present study takes the post-war cohort, Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y as a

reference to determine if the propositions of the present study hold true.

U.S. Generation Cohorts

From the abundance of literature on generations in the U.S., general consensus on its generation cohorts is summarized in Table 1.

Generation Cohorts in Sarawak

Since there is no theoretical foundation to construe generation cohorts in the U.S. population to the Malaysian population, the first study of generations in Malaysia was carried out in 2012 (Ting, de Run, & Fam, 2012; de Run & Ting, 2013). As it was the first attempt, the scope was delimited to Sarawak, which is a state in Malaysia. Not only were five generation cohorts found, the findings also showed that each cohort has its own characteristics due to attachment to specific and distinctive major external events or changes during the formative years, thus corresponding to theories of generations and past assertions (Inglehart, 1997; Rogler, 2002; de Run & Ting, 2013). As expected, the events and their impact on individuals subsequently were found to be largely different from those of the U.S. population. The findings are summarized in Table 2.

Methodology

Research Design

As the study aimed to explore the major external events and the formation of generation cohorts in Malaysia, a qualitative approach was adopted which assumed a paradigm of social constructivism. Such an approach is practically important and useful when the purpose is to gain insights into particular social processes and human phenomena that exist within a specific location and context (Connolly, 1998). Specifically, a hermeneutical phenomenology was adopted as the research inquiry in this study so as to have deeper understanding about the experiences among a group of people. It is useful to investigate what a group of individuals has in common within their experiences (Creswell, 2012; Padilla-Díaz, 2015). As such, subjective meanings and social phenomena, focussing upon the details of the experiences and realities behind these details pertaining to major external events, are the knowledge claims and direction of the study (Creswell, 2012; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2003).

Sampling

A non-probability sampling technique was adopted instead of a probability sampling technique as there was no way to estimate the probability of any one person being included in the sample such a large population like that of Malaysia (Maxfield & Babbie, 2011). It was also inappropriate to assume that human behaviors, such as beliefs and experiences are normally distributed within the population (Eisenhardt, 1989). It is also claimed that generalization is not the criterion for case selection in a qualitative study; instead, the replication of each case that predicts similar results or patterns of findings is what matters (Stake, 1994). In particular, a purposive sampling strategy was used to sample the respondents throughout Malaysia, involving the selection of individuals with predetermined criteria

Table 1
Generation cohorts in the U.S.

Cohort label	Birth years	Defining events during formative years	Brief description of cohort's characteristics
Second World War cohort	1922–1927	Second World War	They worked for common good and were unified by a common goal. They are team oriented and more patriotic than other generational cohorts
Post-war cohort	1928–1945	After Second World War	They experienced remarkable economic growth and social tranquillity, a time of family togetherness. They joined in the rise of the middle class and sought a sense of stability.
Leading-edge Baby Boomer	1946–1954	Assassination of JFK and Martin Luther Jr., Vietnam War	They watched the first man walk on the moon. They also championed the civil and women's rights causes. They are nevertheless hedonistic and self-indulgent.
Trailing-edge Baby Boomer	1955–1965	The first sustained economic downturn since the Great Depression	They witnessed US's defeat in Vietnam, Watergate, Nixon's resignation, the oil embargo, and raging inflation. They are thus less optimistic especially about their financial future than leading-edge Boomers
Gen X	1965–1976	A time of economic and social instability and uncertainty	They matured during an era of soaring divorce, accept cultural diversity, and value quality of personal life more. They are individualists and do not like to be singled out. They show an unmatched spirit of entrepreneurship. They prefer a lifestyle that provides freedom and flexibility.
N Gen or Gen Y, Millennium	1977–1994	The 'Information Revolution'	Growing up in the advent of the Internet, they will be the "engine" of growth over the next two decades. They are more idealistic and social-cause-oriented than Generation X. They are pragmatic as well as elusive consumers that have grown up in a media-saturated environment.

Source: Adopted from Schewe and Meredith (2004) and Bush et al. (2004)

Table 2
Generation cohorts in Sarawak, Malaysia

Cohort label	Birth years	Defining events during formative years	Brief description of cohort's characteristics
Battling-lifers	Before 1942	Japanese occupation	They had to find ways to survive and live during Japanese occupation. They worked hard and were very protective of their family members.
Idealistic-strugglers	1943–1961	Insurgence of communism, British colonization, Malaysia formation	They struggled to secure or maintain good lives during the time of communism, colonization and the forming of Malaysia. Different ideas and beliefs were generated as to what were the better decisions and choices.
Social-strivers	1962–1977	Economic and social progress, Tun Mahathir as the fourth Prime Minister	They care mostly about economic stability and social welfare. Evidently peace and security were brought in after the capitulation of communists, and various developments began to be in place.
Prospective-pursuers	1978–1991	Political unrest, economic crisis, advance in technologies	They have experienced the rapid advancement in technology and recovery from the economic crisis. Their interest in political matters shows that they believe in changes to ensure better future.
Neoteric-inheritors	1992 onwards	Advance in communication technologies, natural disasters, political upheavals	They tend to accept whatever there is around them as they are still in their formative years. They know how to use communication technologies since young and spend a lot of time on communication in social networks.

Source: Adopted from Ting et al. (2012)

who could offer (Patton, 2002). Accordingly, only Malaysian citizens who resided in the country were approached. Moreover, given the purpose of the study, respondents from all age-groups and different ethnic groups (predominantly the Malays, Chinese and Indians) were deliberately sampled.

Since there are no clear guidelines on how many cases and respondents should be included in qualitative studies (Perry, 1998), the concept of data saturation or data redundancy was advocated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Nevertheless, past qualitative studies were still looked into to determine the general consensus on sample sizes (Charmaz, 2006). As a result, age-range was used as a proxy to identify six cases, namely respondents who were 15–24 years old, 25–34 years old, 35–44 years old, 45–54 years old, 55–64 years old, and 65 years old and above. A sample of 13 respondents was predetermined for each case, whereby the last three respondents were sampled to check whether data saturation had been achieved.

Instrument Design

A personal, open-ended interview was used to collect data. It has been the recommended qualitative means for studies related to generation (Fountain & Lamb, 2011; Pennington-Gray, Fridgen, & Stynes, 2013). It allows major external events which Malaysian respondents could overtly recall to be elicited and details related to their experiences to be probed (Schwandt, 2001). An interview protocol was designed to inquire about major historical and societal events which they had found impactful in the past 80 years (Kurasaki, 2000). Questions pertaining to past historical and societal events were designed with reference to Schuman and Scott's (1989) study. Respondents were first asked about the major external events that they could remember in the last 80 years in an open-ended manner.

Auxiliary words, such as external events, and political, economic, social, technological, and natural aspects of the events, were used during probing and follow-ups (Noble & Schewe, 2003). They were then asked to elaborate on the time these events happened and the reasons they were impactful to them one after another in a specific way. This helped clarify whether they were really personally attached to the events during the formative years.

Due to geographical reasons, five enumerators were recruited and trained to perform interviews in addition to the principal researchers. All enumerators were taught with interviewing techniques using role plays, and asked to perform trial interview to ensure they could conduct the interview competently (Bernard, 1995). This is critically important as the key to getting good data is to ask good questions; and asking good questions takes practice (Merriam, 1998). They were also instructed to introduce themselves, describe the purpose of the interview and explain ethnical issues pertaining to the study such as facilitating withdrawal before acquiring the consent from the respondents (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2000).

Data Collection and Analysis

Eighty interviews were conducted throughout the country in the fourth quarter of 2015; all interviews were audio-recorded. Most interviews were conducted in the homes of the respondents at their convenience (Evers & De Boer, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). All interviews were then transcribed verbatim and analyzed using content analysis with the aid of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, namely ATLAS.ti (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Content analysis is often used in marketing studies when data are collected through personal or open-ended interviews (Kassarjian, 1977), and for exploring various communication forms on behaviour (Yale & Gilly, 1988). Not only does it include frequency counts (Wilkinson, 2000), but it also

allows for exploratory analysis of qualitative data pertaining to human and societal phenomena (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Hence, the data were coded using initial coding and pattern coding techniques whereby they were organized into meaningful themes for analysis and interpretation (Saldaña, 2013; Tuckett, 2005).

Consistency and Credibility

Multiple coders were asked to perform analysis independently to ensure the analysis and interpretation were not biased towards the researchers' background. As such, inter-coder reliability was examined using the open-ended interview data using peer review (Bernard, 1995; Kurasaki, 2000; Patton, 2002). This helped ensure data elicited from the transcripts and themes from the aggregate findings were credible and valid for interpretation (Ryan, 1999). The eventual results showed that data saturation was achieved with the sample and the reported agreement for the analysis was above 80 percent. Such agreement satisfies the recommended reliability threshold of 80% (Cicchetti, 1994; Hruschka et al., 2004), hence assuring the replicability of research findings. Moreover, the thick descriptions in the data, and attention to sampling, as well as a detailed account of the methods and processes in carrying out the study flexibly yet with guided procedures made sure that the data collected and analysed were consistent and credible (Merriam, 1998). Furthermore, an ethical approach in the study was constantly maintained (Orb et al., 2000).

Findings and Discussions

The findings of the 80 interviews are summarized and presented in Table 3. Since generation cohorts in Malaysia were essentially unknown, age was used as a proxy to determine whether the major external events to which they were attached to collectively transpired during the formative years of every individual. Such a procedure is

Table 3
Findings of major events by Malaysians

Age-group	Defining events during formative years	Selected quotes
15–24	Introduction of GST, progress of communication technologies	*"As a student, I feel it is very difficult to maintain the financial situation … Sometimes I have to cut down my expenses although I need it desperately, like books … Even books have GST; they say no GST but there is increment in the price."* (Indian, 21 years old) *"I have a lot of appreciation towards … mobile phones, have a lot of value towards it because it's something new, it's something new in a way that it brings in a lot of convenience for a person's life in the sense of communication."* (Chinese, 21 years old)
25–34	Political reformation, advancement of information technology	*"… the reformation … that time was the reformation action and I was a student … around 1998, 1999, because I was in Kajang, the place which was influenced by the reformation and the situation with Anwar Ibrahim … I still remember that reformation."* (Malay, 34 years old) *"… what I recall is the I-phone because iphone has changed the market structure … Instead of just the keypad phone, now everything changes to touch screen, and we can connect everything, like projector, computer, phone call and we can check email anytime."* (Chinese, 29 years old)
35–44	Financial crisis, terrorism (911 incident)	*"The thing that I cannot forget is during 1997 when I received a lot of offers for study. That time the economy was really down, I received offers to study, but I cannot go because all of the scholarships, study loan … freeze."* (Malay, 35 years old) *"When I was in university, I recalled the 911 incident. Then I realized that our society is getting out of control. The more we get developed, the more out of control we are. This event impacted me, I felt afraid. Since this incident, I felt life is impermanent."* (Chinese, 38 years old)
45–55	Financial crisis, social security and development	*"I think economy wise, that time was recession, during 1987 and 1997 when I was in form 4 or 5. During that time, my parents were very fortunate, they had saving and sent me to oversea to study. But until today, I value money and I don't simply spend because of what we went through before."* (Malay, 45 years old) *"I remember one of my relatives was staying in one of the blocks at Highland Tower … We didn't purchase that condo or apartment instead we buy something grounded. We bought something else which is far from the mountain, or else landslide will affect our lives later."* (Malay, 48 years old) *"I was born in 70s, at that moment not many TVs with colour images and our phone basically a dialled phone. Now technology changes very fast … everyone has a hand phone."* (Malay, 45 years old)
56–64	Racial tension, pre-development natural disaster	*"Major events, racial conflicts in May 13, I was in my Form 4 … only you started to realize eh, I am a Malay, that guy is a Chinese [Laughter]. My classmates, some of them, we are very close …"* (Malay, 62 years old) *"You know the flood of 1969. Worst flood in Malaysia in a sense that its kind of like affected a lot of people and all their houses were drown in the flood. Because I was with the Rotaract Clubyou know, and we were doing relieve work, charity work. I was involved."* (Chinese, 64 years old)
65 and Above	Formation of Malaysia, Independence, Insurgence of communism, Japanese occupation	*"I believed the lowering of the British flag and the raising of the Malayan flag at that time was a very big event, in the sense that, you know, people were emotional about it. You know, they had to leave after having the … colonised this place for so long."* (Chinese, 67 years old) *"That was a communist activity … At that time, communist activity was very alarming. The communist wanted to take control the country."* (Indian, 73 years old) *"During the Japanese occupation, pretty messy here. We're from rural area … Dreadful because there are robbery cases everywhere … We didn't go to school during Japanese era. During British era, we were like back to normal. That time they formed Malaysia and Sarawak joined. Singapore did join as well."* (Indigenous group, 86 years old)

necessary to define generation cohorts and detect the emergence of another cohort.

The experience of the major external events and their respective quotes clearly suggest that these defining events or changes which Malaysians were attached to during their formative years were very different from those of the U.S. population. However, these events were found to be largely similar to the findings of generation cohorts of Sarawak, which is a state in the eastern part of Malaysia (de Run & Ting, 2013; Ting et al., 2012). As such, an initial conclusion can be drawn that Malaysia is made up of five generation cohorts. The first generation cohort are notably still in their late adolescence and early adulthood. Apparently they were born after 1990 and are very much into communication technologies. They can be generally labelled as Inheritors because they just adopt whatever is made available to them. The second cohort ranges between the late 1970s and the early 1990s, hence these individuals are in their mid-20s and 30s. They are particularly affected by political situations and the advancement of technologies. They could be named as Pursuers because of their endeavour to achieve their ambitions and goals in the midst of uncertainties. The third cohort is composed of those who were born during the early 1960s to the late 1970s. They are in their late 30s to early 50s today. Due to the experience they had when they came of age, economic and social development is of utmost importance to them. As such, they could be labelled as Strivers. They are different from Pursuers because their pursuit focuses more on stability and comfort in their lives. The fourth cohort is made up of those who experienced racial tension, communist insurgency, the formation of Malaysia, and the independence of Malaya from British colonization. Notably, these are the experiences of those who were born during the 1940s —1960s. Given the fact that they struggled to live and held onto their beliefs and hopes of a better life, it is appropriate to call them Reformers. The fifth cohort is composed of the veterans who experienced Japanese occupation when they were young. Hardship and hard work for the family above themselves were the norms. They were more pragmatic, rather than realistic. Subsequently, they were more likely to accept societal changes and keep doing their own thing, unless their lives and families were threatened. Hence they could be named as Battlers. In light of the aforementioned, the two propositions of the study are supported.

Conclusion

The present study serves as a preliminary attempt and groundwork to identify major historical and societal events which Malaysians found impactful based on their experience during their formative years, and subsequently explored the formation of generation cohorts in Malaysia. A theoretical grounding was critical to the study and the subsequent findings and interpretations due to the misuse of cohort labels and descriptions from the U.S. sources and the absence of knowledge about the actual generation cohorts in Malaysia. Suffice to say that the adoption of cohort labels and characteristics from the U.S. sources—especially the well-known Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y—with the assumption that their age-ranges and birth years are

applicable to the Malaysian population is neither appropriate nor true (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; de Run & Ting, 2013). There are simply no Baby Boomers, Gen X, or Gen Y in Malaysian history. Hence, it is unfortunate to see many Malaysian studies continue using Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y to profile the sampled respondents and make inference of their behaviours based on the experience of the U.S. cohorts. Despite the rapid advancement of technologies, like social networks, which connect people from all over the world, it is still baseless to claim Gen Y or Gen Z is identical to Malaysian young people.

In a nutshell, the study not only validated the use of the sociological theories in defining generation cohorts in a different setting, it also lays down a needed foundation for researchers, marketers, and practitioners to recalibrate their understanding of generations, reconsider educational materials related to generations, and revise segmentation strategies. In fact, the deficiency of using common age-groups or median years of birth rather than major external events as proxies for generation in cross-cultural countries has long been highlighted (Inglehart, 1997). As such, the use of the qualitative approach in the present study makes it possible to identify the actual generation cohorts in a different setting and makes it necessary for future research to look into the implication of generations on the subjects under investigation. In light of the aforementioned, future studies are needed to delve into the values and lifestyles of each generation cohort, and the differences across the cohorts in greater detail. Moreover, this study serves as a precursor to future attempts to explore generation cohorts in other developing countries, especially those in Southeast Asia. The findings would apply not only in marketing, but would be also relevant to various social science disciplines and practices, such as education and management. It is believed that such endeavours would provide researchers, marketers, and practitioners with a whole new outlook about the people they are dealing with, be it consumer, student, colleague, or employee. As far as the Malaysian generation cohorts are concerned, no one should ignore the existence of these cohorts nor persist with the U.S. cohorts in their future studies.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

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