Are Generational Gaps or Life Stage Segments Better at Explaining Societal Differences?

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Abstract

For many years, society has been defined by generational value conflicts (Twenge, 2010). As people are living longer and having children later in life (Smith, 1999) within a quickly changing technological world, we hypothesize that life stages rather than generational differences might be better predictors of attitudes and behaviors across a wide variety of social topics.

We used a large modular survey of 23,595 respondents fielded in July of 2021 to look at which variable, life stage or generation, explains the most variance across a wide variety of social topics. The topics explored directly through behavior and attitudinal statements in the survey included Automotive, Food & Beverage, Finance, Fashion, Health and Beauty, Health, Self-Care, Media, Advertising, Sports, Technology and Travel. We ran a one-way ANOVA across all 800+ variables and compared how much variation can be explained by either life stage or generation.

As an extension, we ran the same tests on a look-a-like modeled dataset (Ma, 2016) of 131,000 respondents to see if the results still hold in these modeled databases commonly used as seeds for activation purposes in direct marketing.

Background and Objectives

It is well understood that segmentation analysis involving a variety of variables has higher explanatory power than a single variable. Given that, it is the preferred strategy for understanding what explains consumer attitudes and behaviors in market research. However, this form of advanced analytics is not always suitable for inclusion in all types of materials explaining survey results, particularly if the general population is the primary audience for the research findings, as the concept of segmentation can be complex. Given the complexity of segmentation, generation is widely used as a variable for data analysis, particularly for findings aimed at the general public.

While analyzing data by a single demographic variable (e.g., age or generation) may be easier for the general public to understand, we questioned the validity of the approach given its simplification of an individual's experience. Our hypothesis was that life stage, which takes into account a variety of other factors but is still an accessible concept, would better explain consumer attitudes and behaviors. Our analysis then revolved around exploring the explanatory power of generation compared to that of life stage. If life stage were proven to be a better predictor, it could be used in place of generation when other, more advanced forms of analysis are not accessible or appropriate.

Our specific research questions are:

1. Is life stage or generation a better predictor of attitudes and behaviors across a wide variety of social topics?

2. How consistent are these results, not only on original data, but on the look-a-like modeled dataset?

Method

Analysis

In order to assess which variable (generation or life stage) better explained variations in attitudes and behaviors, a definition of life stage was created (see below). One-way ANOVA tests were then performed, and the resulting r-squared values of generation and life stage were compared. The analysis utilized survey data about consumers' attitudes and behaviors across the following topic areas: Automotive, Food & Beverage, Finance, Fashion, Health and Beauty, Health, Self-Care, Media, Advertising, Sports, Technology and Travel. The analysis was then repeated using modeled data.

Data Sources

The survey data used in this analysis was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll between July 22-29, 2021 among n=23,595 US adults aged 18+. A minimum of 10,000 respondents completed each topic module. Data were weighted where necessary by age, gender, household size, annual income, marital status, race/ethnicity, and wireless provider to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the US adult 18+ population.

CUE is a customer insights platform designed to intelligently stitch together multiple data sources, yielding unprecedented customer understanding to accelerate new ideas and innovations. CUE combines individual survey data with behavioral, transactional and location assets to find precise audience segments and understand impactful market behaviors pivotal for transformational brand growth. For this research, this platform was used to build a look-a-like modeled data set to validate the findings from the survey data by seeing if they held true within modeled data as well.

Category Definitions

Below are the category definitions used for this research both for generation and life stage. For comparability, we ensured that the same number of categories were used for both generation and life stage.

Generation: *(Pew Definitions)*
- **Gen Z:** Born 1997-2004 (18-25)
- **Millennials:** 1981-1996 (26-41)
- **Gen X:** 1965-1980 (42-57)
- **Boomers:** 1946-1964 (58-76)
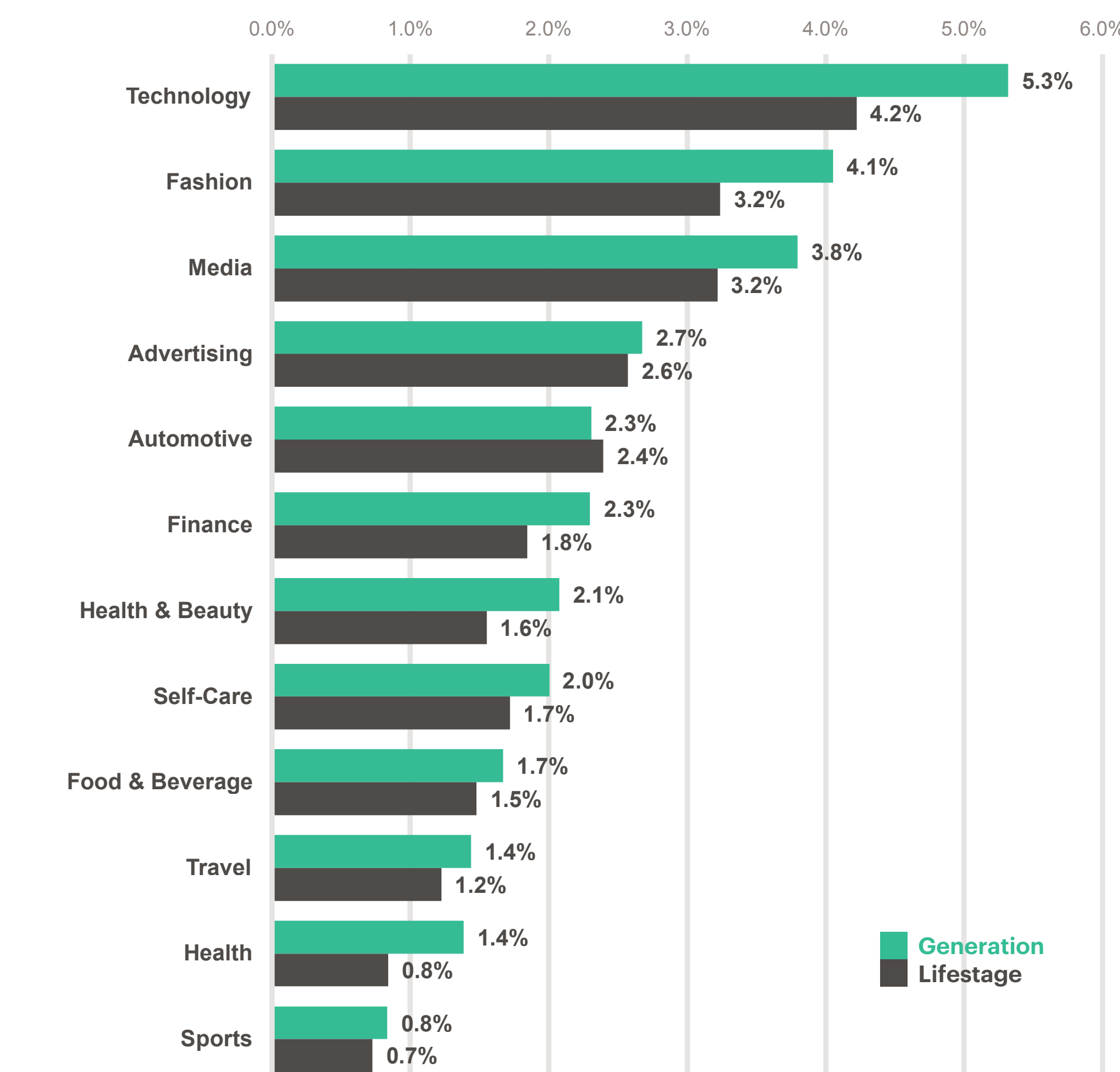- **Silent Gen:** Born 1945 or earlier (77+)

Life Stage:
- **Young Adults:** Non-retired, single adults with none of their own child(ren) in their household who do not yet own and are not considering buying a home
- **Established Adults:** Non-retired adults with none of their own child(ren) in their household who are either no longer single or who own or are considering buying a home
- **New Parents:** Have young children in their household under the age of 5 (regardless of employment or home ownership status)
- **Established Parents:** Have older children in their household at least 5 years old (regardless of employment or home ownership status)
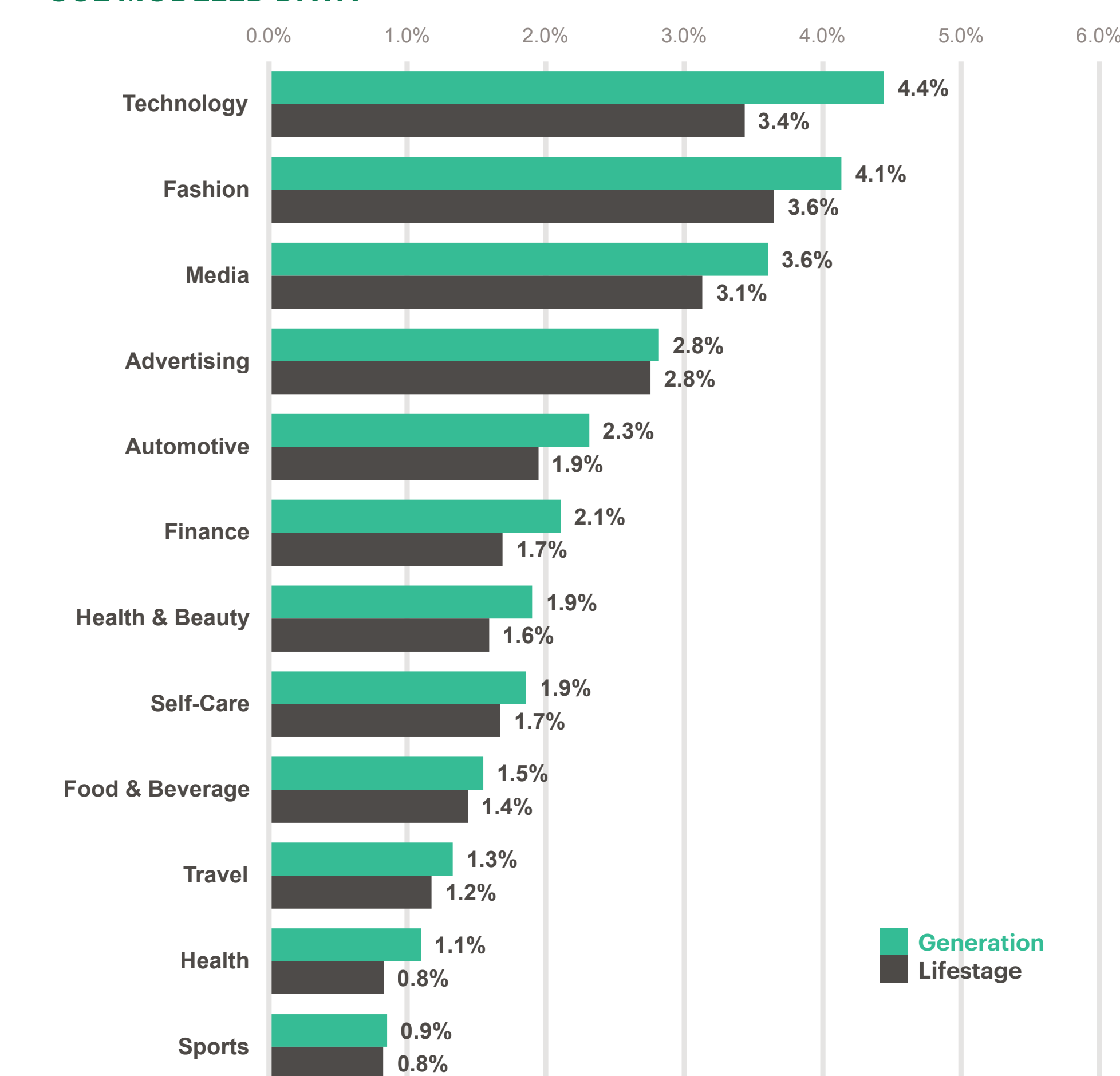- **Other:** Remaining respondents

Results

The percentages in the charts below represent the amount of variation in attitudes and behaviors for each category that are explained by either generation or life stage.

**R² Values for Generation & Life Stage Across a Variety of Categories
SURVEY DATA**

Category	Generation	Lifestage
Technology	5.3%	4.2%
Fashion	4.1%	3.2%
Media	3.8%	3.2%
Advertising	2.7%	2.6%
Automotive	2.3%	2.4%
Finance	2.3%	1.8%
Health & Beauty	2.1%	1.6%
Self-Care	2.0%	1.7%
Food & Beverage	1.7%	1.5%
Travel	1.4%	1.2%
Health	1.4%	0.8%
Sports	0.8%	0.7%

Generation proves to explain more variation in attitudes and behaviors across the board than life stage for the categories tested. This is especially true when it comes to technology, fashion, and media.

**R² Values for Generation & Life Stage Across a Variety of Categories
CUE MODELED DATA**

Category	Generation	Lifestage
Technology	4.4%	3.4%
Fashion	4.1%	3.6%
Media	3.6%	3.1%
Advertising	2.8%	2.8%
Automotive	2.3%	1.9%
Finance	2.1%	1.7%
Health & Beauty	1.9%	1.6%
Self-Care	1.9%	1.7%
Food & Beverage	1.5%	1.4%
Travel	1.3%	1.2%
Health	1.1%	0.8%
Sports	0.9%	0.8%

The same conclusions hold true for our modeled data set - generation continues to explain more variation in attitudes and behaviors for all categories tested than life stage.

Conclusion

While generation explained more variation in attitudes and behaviors than life stage when using survey data as well as modeled data, neither of the variables had strong predictive values. This finding highlights the case for reliance on segmentation when analyzing data. When segmentation is not possible, conclusions drawn from simple analysis by generation should be viewed with caution.

Limitations

The life stage categories used in this research have not been validated or used in other research.

Next steps for future research

- Explore alternate life stage category definitions to determine if other definitions would yield greater explanatory power.

- Test generation and life stage against other single variables across topic categories to see which variable tends to be the best single predictor of attitudes and behaviors for each module.

### Interested to learn more about this research?

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References

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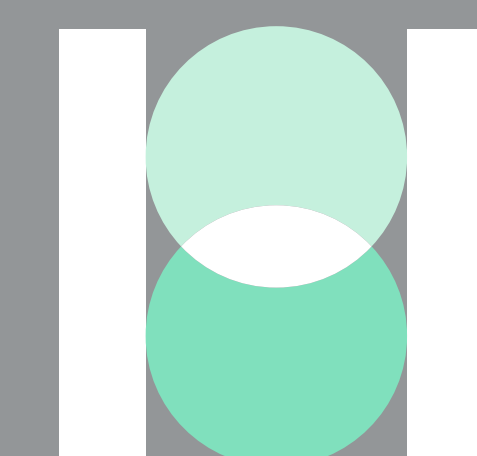
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