

Editorial: Generation Alpha and the evolution of consumer insights

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Background

Generational cohort theory offers a framework for understanding the behaviors and values shared by individuals born within a particular period (Inglehart, 1997; Mannheim, 2013; Schewe and Meredith, 2004). Contrary to traditional views, a generation is not defined solely by its range of birth years or ages. Rather, it is the formative events and experiences that influence a generation's perspectives, beliefs and behavioral patterns over time, thus distinguishing one generational cohort from another (Egri and Ralston, 2004; Rogler, 2002; Ting *et al.*, 2018). These events and experiences occur within unique historical, social, cultural, economic and technological contexts, explaining why individuals within the same age range may diverge significantly depending on where and how they grow up.

Generation Alpha exemplifies the generational cohort principle. The Australian consulting agency McCrindle Research introduced the term "Generation Alpha" to refer to those born between 2010 and 2025 (McCrindle and Wolfinger, 2009). With early and immersive exposure to digital technology, including its heightened gravity during the COVID-19 pandemic, these individuals have been raised amidst rapid digital innovation, pervasive global connectivity and substantial societal shifts. Such phenomena have differentiated the cognitive development, social interactions and consumer preferences of Generation Alpha in ways that traditional demographic or psychographic models often fail to predict (Ahn *et al.*, 2025; Aksar *et al.*, 2025). Consequently, the emergence of Generation Alpha challenges conventional market research paradigms, as approaches that assume uniformity within age-based groups risk overgeneralization and overlook critical variations.

Hence, tailoring marketing approaches for Generation Alpha within the contemporary context necessitates accounting for intergenerational and intragenerational diversity (Van den Bergh *et al.*, 2025), as well as anticipating how these young consumers will engage with technology, culture and markets when they come of age (Stylos and Bellou, 2025; Ting *et al.*, 2021). To this end, adopting the generational theory lens offers the conceptual rigor needed to distinguish Generation Alpha's temporary age-related behaviors from shared generational traits, capturing how defining historical and social moments and formative experiences shape the generation's enduring characteristics. The vital implications of this generational analysis for marketing research and business practice are what drives us, hailing from diverse backgrounds, to put forward our views in this Editorial.

Defining the characteristics and distinctiveness of generation alpha

Generation Alpha, often described as individuals born between 2010 and 2025, currently encompasses approximately two billion people aged zero to 15 years old

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([McCrindle and Wolfinger, 2009](#); [Gillett et al., 2025](#)). In line with generational theory, the shared formative events, cultural shifts and environmental factors experienced by this generation during its developmental years include early exposure to digital technology (e.g. automation, artificial intelligence), integrated communication and global crises, which have altogether cultivated their unprecedented technological fluency; swift formation of digital habits; and preferences for fast, visual, interactive and highly personalized learning. Notably, these experiences have collectively shaped the generation's distinguishing values of resilience, adaptability and emerging social ethics ([Jimenez, 2025](#); [Schewe et al., 2013](#); [Van den Bergh et al., 2025](#)). At the intersection of these influences is the Millennial parenting style, whose emphasis on social awareness, education and ethical consumption further molds Generation Alpha's identity, autonomy and engagement ([Brito, 2023](#); [Chan, 2023](#)).

Consequently, Generation Alpha's experiences are highly heterogeneous, with socioeconomic status, geographic location, cultural norms and technology access producing substantial within-cohort diversity. As such, assuming uniformity based solely on birth years risks overlooking key variations and misinterpreting age-related behaviors as cohort traits ([Ting et al., 2021](#)). Generation Alpha's collective experience of digital technology, global cultural exposure and evolving social expectations has manifested as preferences, ethical awareness and communication styles that stand apart from preceding cohorts. These differences, in turn, influence family consumption patterns and broader market dynamics even before these young individuals become primary consumers ([Chan, 2023](#)). Moving forward, Generation Alpha's uniqueness also carries profound implications for their future behaviors as leaders and employees in the organizational context ([Jang et al., 2025](#); [Tan and Chin, 2023](#)). Understanding cohort-specific characteristics is, therefore, crucial for developing a holistic understanding of Generation Alpha in adulthood, anticipating early consumer behaviors and informing socially and culturally responsive strategies.

Limitations in current market research

Traditional market research frameworks (e.g. demographic and psychographic models) often assume that individuals who share age or birth-year characteristics also share similar motivations, preferences and behaviors. While these methods have provided insights on older cohorts, they fail to capture the complexity of Generation Alpha. For instance, demographic segmentation – the grouping individuals by age, gender, income or family structure – may obscure meaningful differences driven by the generation's formative experiences, access to technology or household dynamics. Similarly, despite capturing values, interests and lifestyles, psychographic segmentation struggles to reflect the diversity within Generation Alpha, particularly when influenced by parental practices, digital immersion and cross-cultural exposure. Focus groups, interviews and ethnographic studies provide detailed insights as well, but are insufficient in isolation due to their bias tendency, limited generalizability and reliance on adult interpretations of children's behaviors ([Taylor, 2025](#)).

Generational theories underscore the importance of distinguishing age, period and cohort effects. However, developmental stage effects may mimic generational traits, while period effects introduce temporary or lasting shifts in behavior ([Parry and Urwin, 2017](#)). Without careful research design, these effects can be conflated, leading to inaccurate conclusions about what is truly cohort-specific. In addition, Western-centric labels and global generalizations limit validity. According to [Ting et al. \(2021\)](#), applying terms like "Millennials" and "Generation Z" across regions without considering local formative events result in the minimization of contextual differences in experiences, values and socialization patterns. Variability in access to technology, educational resources and cultural norms introduces additional heterogeneity that static models fail to capture.

These limitations create conceptual blind spots in understanding early consumer behavior among Generation Alpha. Misinterpreting cohort traits may lead to irrelevant knowledge,

which when applied to practice, can produce ineffective product design and misguided marketing strategies that fail to resonate with Generation Alpha's emerging preferences and social consciousness (see [Lowe et al., 2020](#)). Therefore, a framework grounded in generational theory, particularly one that is attentive to formative events, within-cohort diversity and socio-technical contexts, is critical to avoiding the pitfalls of outdated assumptions and producing accurate, actionable insights.

Future research agenda

To advance the understanding of Generation Alpha, academic inquiry must move beyond age-based classifications to account for formative events, contextual diversity and evolving socio-technical environments. Accordingly, future research on this cohort requires a coherent agenda that integrates theory, empirical design and methodological rigor. While this Editorial is by no means comprehensive, it nevertheless provides an avenue for further dialogue on how and why research pertaining to Generation Alpha should be carefully conducted to avoid the extraneous dissemination of knowledge – be it spoken or written – to the real world.

Theoretical and conceptual directions

Generational theories posit that enduring dispositions arise from shared formative events, social conditions and cultural backgrounds rather than merely from developmental stages ([Rogler, 2002](#); [Schewe and Noble, 2000](#)). The collective experiences of living through cataclysmic crises and historical incidents form cohort-specific behaviors and values in ways that are not reducible to age or life-cycle alone ([Cottrell, 2025](#); [Schuman and Scott, 1989](#)). Correspondingly, there have been calls for research on generations to prioritize the distinction between age-related behaviors and true cohort traits ([Jimenez, 2025](#); [Ting et al., 2021](#)). For Generation Alpha, notably, formative experiences (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic, global digital connectivity and sociocultural shifts) interact with national culture and local contexts to create distinct sub-cohorts. Differences in access to technology, educational resources and household dynamics (e.g. intergenerational relationships) further shape meaningful variations in their behavior, preferences and socialization patterns.

In addition to generation-based theories, [Bronfenbrenner's \(2000\)](#) ecological systems theory provides another robust sociological framework for examining how family, school, technology and societal structures interact with cohort membership to shape individual development. According to the theory, a person's immediate environment (e.g. parenting practices and educational approaches) blends with broader digital ecosystems and evolving social norms to influence identity formation, autonomy and technology use ([Nuvoli et al., 2025](#)). Millennial parenting ecology further contributes to these patterns among Generation Alpha, with varying parenting methods, social media performance pressures and concerns for digital well-being cultivating the cohort's identity, self-regulation and ethical engagement with technology ([De Simone et al., 2025](#); [Brito, 2023](#)). Hence, understanding paradoxes in Generation Alpha's experiences is essential for accurate conceptualization and subsequent operationalization in research.

Overall, for theoretical clarity and comparability across studies, researchers should explicitly state how Generation Alpha is defined and conceptualized. Rather than treating the cohort as a self-evident or homogeneous category, they should specify:

- the birth-year boundaries adopted and the rationale for these boundaries;
- whether the focus is on age-related behaviors, cohort-specific traits or both; and
- how cohort membership is theoretically linked to formative historical, social or technological events.

Failure to explicitly state these distinctions or characteristics puts a study at risk of confusing developmental stage effects with cohort effects, thereby compromising theoretical positioning and rigor.

Empirical and methodological priorities

Robust longitudinal cohort research is always useful for capturing the developmental trajectories of a generation across their lifespan, especially so for Generation Alpha before and after they come of age. Age-period-cohort models are also useful in disentangling developmental stage effects, historical period effects and true cohort effects. Apart from that, comparing Generation Alpha with Generation Z at equivalent life stages may clarify which behavioral patterns reflect age-related development and which emerge from cohort-specific formative experiences (Fannon and Nielsen, 2019; Ting *et al.*, 2021).

In terms of sample diversity, selecting respondents who not only fulfill the purpose and target population of a study but also exhibit various demographic and psychographic characteristics can provide a fuller understanding of within-cohort diversity and contextual influences (Chan, 2023). Cross-national and culturally-diverse sampling is especially critical for understanding how local contexts, national cultures and formative events shape cohort characteristics. Generation Alpha children who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic or who have uneven access to digital resources may display distinctive consumption patterns, social behaviors and developmental outcomes, illustrating how cohort effects interact with environmental conditions (Cottrell, 2025; Chan, 2023). Experimental and quasi-experimental designs can therefore provide additional opportunities to establish causality pertaining to the effects of formative experiences and digital immersion. More so, randomized trials can examine how different levels of technology exposure influence cognitive, social or emotional development. Interventions in digital literacy, AI evaluation and online safety can further be assessed for their protective and developmental impact (Nuvoli *et al.*, 2025; De Simone *et al.*, 2025).

In short, the methodological points scholars should consider and clarify in their papers are as follows:

- the formative events and contextual conditions that are assumed to shape Generation Alpha in their study (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic, digital ecosystem characteristics and socioeconomic, cultural or institutional environments);
- where data collection spans multiple years or locations, how temporal and contextual variations influence observed behaviors and whether such variations are theoretically meaningful; and
- whether their study implicitly assumes homogeneity, within-cohort heterogeneity or sub-cohort differentiation within Generation Alpha.

Whether in quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods research, attention to the aforementioned areas prevents overgeneralized and biased results while improving the explanatory and/or predictive power of generational arguments. It also goes without saying that ethical collection and analysis of data from children and adolescents is central to any such work. Clear methodological protocols in Generation Alpha studies must safeguard privacy, ensure informed consent (e.g. from parents or guardians) and uphold participant autonomy.

Implications for practice

Understanding Generation Alpha through the lens of generation theories has direct implications not only for marketers, but also for educators, employers and policymakers. Recognizing that cohort traits emerge from shared historical, cultural and technological

contexts, rather than birth year alone, avoids the misinterpretation of short-term developmental behaviors as lasting generational characteristics. For employers and practitioners, this implies the need to design strategies that reflect the heterogeneous nature of Generation Alpha. Instead of assuming uniform preferences based solely on age, employers should develop management systems and organizational cultures that embrace the cohort's digital fluency, social consciousness and diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Educators, in turn, can build learning environments that are interactive, personalized and sensitive to Generation Alpha's cognitive and social development, which continues to evolve with technological advancements and formative events. Curriculum and teaching approaches should ultimately balance shared cohort dispositions with individual differences to ensure inclusive and adaptive learning experiences.

Policies on digital literacy, mental health and social participation are more effective when informed by research that distinguishes temporary developmental patterns from enduring generational traits. Thus, policymakers can also benefit by grounding national and regional initiatives in a clear understanding of the social, digital and environmental conditions shaping Generation Alpha. Suffice it to say, a nuanced application of generational theory helps ensure that strategies across marketing, education and policy remain relevant, ethically sensitive and aligned with the evolving behaviors, values and expectations of this emerging cohort.

Conclusion

Understanding Generation Alpha requires moving beyond age-based classifications toward a generational framework that foregrounds formative experiences, contextual influences and within-cohort diversity. Early digital immersion, global crises, Millennial parenting practices and local contexts interact to shape heterogeneous pathways within the cohort, challenging assumptions of uniformity embedded in conventional market research approaches. As such, situating Generation Alpha within their shared historical, cultural and technological conditions provides a more robust lens for distinguishing enduring generational traits from temporary developmental behaviors.

Addressing these complexities demands theory-driven, empirically rigorous and ethically grounded research agendas. Longitudinal, cross-national and mixed-methods designs are the prevailing pathways for disentangling age, period and cohort effects that encapsulate the diversity defining Generation Alpha. For practitioners across business, education and policy areas, the insights obtained from applying generational theories enables more inclusive, context-sensitive and effective strategies that reflect the evolving values, behaviors and expectations of this emerging cohort in the real-world settings. Therefore, we conclude this Editorial by reiterating the importance of generational research that is analytically precise, socially responsive and attuned to the lived realities of Generation Alpha in a rapidly changing global environment.

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